



An Interview with Mariette Thomas, Director, Center for International Education, Loyola University New Orleans

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In an era marked by geopolitical uncertainty, shifting visa regulations, and rapidly changing patterns of student mobility, summer session administrators face more complexity than ever when serving international students and building meaningful global learning opportunities. To help unpack these challenges, *Summer Academe* spoke with Mariette Thomas, director of the Center for International Education at Loyola University New Orleans. With extensive experience in international program recruitment, partnership development, and study-abroad program design, Thomas offers insights and practical recommendations for institutions looking to stabilize and strengthen their summer global initiatives.

In the conversation below, she discusses emerging trends, strategies for resilient program development, and the competencies administrators will need as global higher education continues to evolve.

QUESTIONS

1. International student recruitment has been particularly volatile in recent years. From your vantage point at Loyola, what trends or shifts should administrators be paying closest attention to as they plan for the next few enrollment cycles?

At Loyola, our Center for International Education works closely with admitted international students, which gives us a unique perspective on emerging trends. First, geopolitical and policy uncertainty continues to shape enrollment. Changes in visa regulations, immigration policies, and perceptions of safety and stability can quickly and dramatically affect enrollment decisions. Even when policies remain stable, the perception of uncertainty can influence whether students choose to enroll.

Second, many universities are seeing shifts in their traditional sending countries, highlighting the importance of diversification. While students from established sending countries remain important, emerging or less common regions are increasingly significant. I believe this diversity is one reason Loyola has continued to see success even during challenging times. It's important to keep in mind that students from different countries or regions may have different expectations or support needs, which has implications for planning and resource allocation.

Third, cost considerations and return on investment are increasingly driving student decisions. Students are asking more often about scholarships, funding opportunities, internships, and postgraduation prospects. Providing clear and consistent information about costs, financing options, career pathways, and experiential learning—like research opportunities or internships—is essential during and after the admission process.

Fourth, competition from other countries remains strong, especially where poststudy work options or immigration pathways are perceived as more favorable.

Finally, there's growing emphasis on student support, belonging, and well-being. From admission through graduation and beyond, international students are seeking accessible, high-quality advising and support services, mental health resources, and opportunities to engage with a community. These factors are critical for retention and student success.

2. Policies surrounding visas, travel restrictions, and geopolitical tensions continue to change rapidly. What practical steps can institutions take during the summer term to support international students through these uncertainties while still maintaining a smooth enrollment process?

During the summer, institutions can support international students by communicating clearly and proactively and by regularly updating guidance on visa requirements, travel restrictions, and other regulations. Providing enhanced

advising on visas, travel planning, and documentation helps reduce confusion and stress, ensuring students feel informed and supported.

When possible, offering flexible enrollment options allows students to start their studies despite uncertainties, keeping them on track academically. Admissions teams, international services, academic departments, and summer session administrators can coordinate to deliver consistent messaging and advising and support services and plan contingencies for travel or visa disruptions.

Finally, virtual engagement opportunities over the summer can foster community, build connections, and support student well-being. By offering online orientations, discussion groups, and social or academic activities before arrival, institutions can help students feel connected, informed, and prepared, laying the groundwork for a successful and engaging on-campus experience.

3. Many universities are trying to rebuild or expand their study-abroad offerings after several years of interruptions. What advice would you give summer session administrators who want to design short-term programs that are both academically rigorous and logistically resilient?

I think the first step is to understand both your students' interests and needs as well as your institution's strengths, including faculty expertise and available resources. That understanding informs early decision-making, including decisions around the types of programs you offer, the locations you select, the courses you design, and the support structures you provide.

With this clarity, you can create programs that are both academically rigorous and logistically resilient. Clear learning outcomes and engaging coursework are essential, as is adherence to best practices in education abroad for risk management. At the same time, programs need enough flexibility to respond to unexpected challenges—or even take advantage of unforeseen opportunities.

Strong partnerships with local partners and faculty, along with proactive communication with students, help ensure programs run smoothly.

Finally, embracing innovation and unexpected opportunities can enhance the student experience while holding high academic and operational standards.

4. Short-term summer programs are often a student's first global experience. Based on your experience, what elements make a summer study-abroad program particularly impactful and accessible for students who may be hesitant or who have financial or cultural barriers?

Short-term summer programs can be a great way for students to “dip their toes” into international experiences, especially for those who haven't traveled abroad before. (That's actually how I first began my journey in international education.) Their shorter duration also makes it easier to participate without interrupting work or other obligations, giving students a manageable first exposure to studying abroad.

Financial accessibility is crucial. Providing additional funding or scholarships ensures that students from diverse backgrounds can participate.

Finally, programs are most impactful when they offer strong support and an inclusive environment. Mentorship, guidance, and a structured support system help students feel confident in a new setting. Designing programs that consider cultural and accessibility needs ensures that all students can fully engage and benefit from the experience.

5. International partnerships are crucial for both inbound and outbound mobility. What strategies have you found most effective for building and maintaining strong global partnerships that can sustain high-quality summer opportunities—even in unstable times?

I've often found that a successful partnership depends on being in the right place at the right time with the right people. Strong collaborations begin by connecting with institutions and faculty who share your academic goals and values, ensuring alignment in program quality and the student experience. Maintaining open, transparent communication helps build and sustain trust over time.

Flexibility is critical, particularly in uncertain or rapidly changing contexts. Having contingency plans for travel, accommodations, or program delivery helps partnerships remain resilient during disruptions.

Finally, partnerships that offer reciprocal value tend to last. Programs that provide meaningful engagement for both institutions are more sustainable. By combining the right relationships, clear communication, and shared benefits, partnerships can support high-quality summer opportunities even in challenging circumstances.

6. Communication with international applicants often breaks down due to time zones, document requirements, or cultural differences. What communication practices or tools do you recommend to summer session offices to keep international students engaged and informed throughout the recruitment and prearrival processes?

When working with international applicants, institutions must communicate clearly, consistently, and proactively. Setting expectations early helps reduce confusion and build trust. Sharing information through multiple formats—emails, messaging apps, digital handbooks, checklists, printed materials, and short videos—allows students to review content at their own pace using the platforms that suit them best. This flexibility also helps students who are navigating different time zones.

Using a centralized communication tool is also important. A single, regularly updated web page or portal helps ensure students are receiving accurate and consistent information.

Automated reminders—sent via email or messaging tools—reinforce key deadlines while messaging platforms or scheduled virtual office hours let students ask questions in real time.

Cultural awareness and a personal approach make a meaningful difference. When administrators, faculty, and staff use a mindful tone, avoid jargon, and offer support that aligns with students' cultural expectations, they help students feel welcomed and understood.

Connecting applicants with current students or alumni adds a human element that keeps them engaged and confident as they prepare to arrive.

7. Looking ahead, international education is likely to continue changing quickly. What competencies or mindsets do you think summer session administrators will need to develop in order to thrive in this new era of global mobility and student expectations?

The landscape of international education has changed significantly in the last few years, teaching us the importance of expecting the unexpected. I think summer session administrators will need a combination of adaptability, cultural competence, empathy, and resilience to thrive in this dynamic environment. They'll need to respond quickly to disruptions, anticipate challenges, and implement solutions that maintain program quality and student support.

Administrators will need to collaborate closely and communicate clearly across departments, partners, and time zones, keeping cultural considerations in mind. At the same time, they can use an innovative mindset and technological skills to leverage hybrid programming, virtual engagement, and digital tools that enhance accessibility and learning. Above all, administrators must center empathy and a student-focused approach to create inclusive and meaningful experiences for all participants.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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