

 CASES FROM THE FIELD

What It Means to Be a Global University During a Pandemic

By M.J. Knoll-Finn

Leading through a pandemic shifted how enrollment management offices leverage their global networks. At New York University (NYU), leaders identified: what it is like to manage a crisis that affects campuses in different time zones; how data is used to develop strategic enrollment management (SEM) plans; and how virtual tools, communications, and SEM staffing can create a unified student experience. This case study contributes to the research about global universities and their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Over the last decade, an increasing number of colleges and universities around the world have adopted a strategy, and sought to build an identity that includes international students and global education. COVID-19 called into question this strategy for some institutions, while others found strength in it. At NYU, global diversity has been one of the shining lights of innovation and strength during this unprecedented year. The university attracted 100,000 applications for admission for the 2021–22 cycle—the most it has ever received—and increased admittance of historically underrepresented groups. NYU was able to retain students at high rates, offering flexible course modalities as well as a “Go Local” option for students across the globe. NYU’s deep history of innovation, persistence, and diversity enabled it to weather this crisis but also continue to innovate and connect with students in new and important ways.

The pandemic certainly highlighted what it means to be a global university and inspired changes to how NYU markets itself, shares resources, works with and ensures the safety of staff, and builds cohesive student experiences not limited by geography. The university has been examining how enrollment management offices can utilize data, communications, and local resources to serve global communities better. When it comes to global and domestic politics, economic security, and health and safety, education—and specifically higher education—sits at the nexus of this challenging time. Now is when those in the field of enrollment management need to lean into each other and find ways to support one another’s work. In fact, the pandemic is likely to transform higher education—from increasing global diversity to implementing flexible course modalities—and in many ways, it already has. Everyone

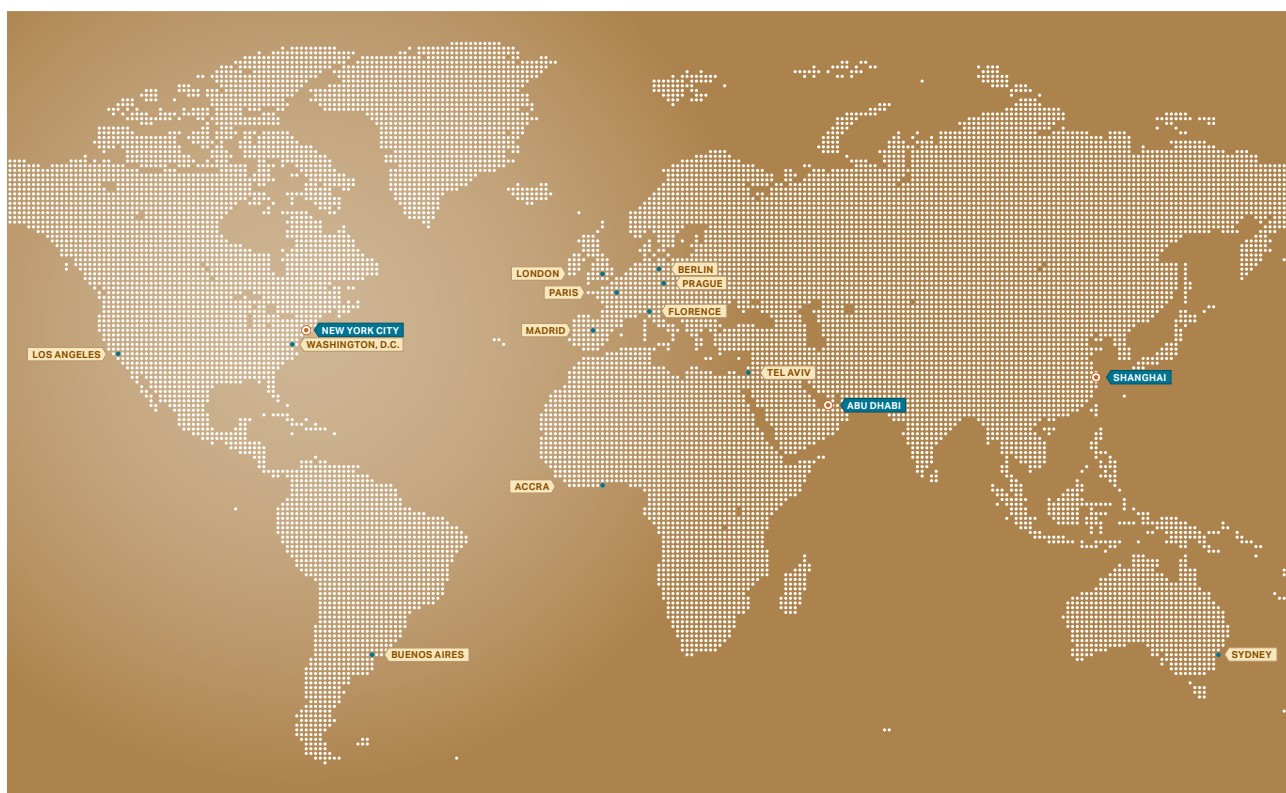


FIGURE 1 ► NYU's Fifteen Locations Worldwide

in higher education benefits when practitioners share their experiences along the way.

Literature Review

Research about institutional responses to the COVID-19 crisis and its impact on global operations is limited. That said, organizations like the Institute of International Education (IIE) have long tracked trends in international education and student mobility. For this article, the author closely examined the “Open Doors 2020” report on international educational exchange to better understand the global university and how NYU compares to its peers. Additionally, the author considers the work of Beck and Wright (2017) and Stolzenberg *et al.* (2018), who provide insight into the trends among Generation Z college students. This article contributes to the burgeoning body of research on how global universities have responded, and continue to respond, to the pandemic.

A University Without Walls

NYU is often referred to as a university without walls. Once in and of New York City, it is now “in and of the world,” with degree granting campuses in Abu Dhabi and Shanghai and twelve academic centers across the world. It has admissions staff across the globe and dedicated administrators on the ground who support students. This idea of a “university without walls” took on new meaning in 2020 as NYU strengthened the connectedness of its entire network.

NYU's presence around the world, long-standing commitment and respect toward the communities and cultures in which it has academic centers and campuses, and support for students and faculty to participate in the global experience, helped to inform and strengthen its response to the pandemic. The university has experts in fourteen countries who see themselves as an integral part of the NYU community. These experts played an

important role in problem solving the issues that began to unfold during the spring of 2020.

More than 5,000 NYU students study abroad each year, the most of any other university in the United States (IIE 2020). NYU also enrolls more international students than any other university in the United States—more than 6,000 international students representing nearly 150 countries (IIE 2020). This diversity strengthens both the institution's understanding of the world and its students' opportunities to expand their horizons and network.

The entire staff is spread across the globe and must work together to understand culture and diversity, develop clear strategies based on this knowledge, and use data and technology to support its work and stay connected. All of this elevates the team's ability to solve problems and think creatively. There are staff at all twelve campuses and the three degree-granting locations. The staff help each other understand what is happening across the globe and bring context country by country.

Leaders of this large team must constantly consider how well they manage across borders; understand cities at different stages of the pandemic; and what recruitment, retention, and graduation look like for students during a global crisis. Evidence-based decision-making and communication were key factors in enrollment management's ability to effectively respond to the crisis and continue to see positive recruitment and retention results.

Early Pandemic Challenges

Enrollment management leaders were at NYU's campus in Abu Dhabi in January 2020, right when the world began to realize it might be facing a pandemic. It was the beginning of the Lunar New Year in China, and the NYU Shanghai campus was on holiday break. Once NYU understood the crisis, and the Chinese government let leadership know that schools may need to shut down in-person classes, the China, Abu Dhabi, and New York teams as well as the global team who runs the twelve NYU global study away sites, held meetings to strategize how to deal with the scenario. The challenge was how to help the 2,000 students studying in Shanghai

continue their studies and persist through what many thought at the time would amount to a clunky start to the spring semester. Not knowing that this would be a long-term issue, various teams spent a lot of time during the first two weeks of the spring term figuring out how to recraft the early part of the semester in the virtual space. That was the beginning of testing and learning that showed the strength of the global network. The pandemic was not yet in the United States or Abu Dhabi, but the university was practicing, learning, and moving NYU Shanghai into a new virtual world, which started to roll NYU through changes at other campuses during the early months of 2020.

As it became clear that this crisis would persist beyond just the start of the semester, NYU discussed how it might move Shanghai students to other global sites. The strength of NYU's sites across the world is that students and facilities are located in key regions. Leadership from across teams brainstormed how to give students an opportunity to study at a site closer to home, which would allow them to have some in-person classes while also maintaining enrollment for spring. Very few Shanghai students took a leave of absence, and many chose to study at a different global site. In fact 97 percent of NYU Shanghai undergraduates enrolled at the beginning of spring 2020 persisted through the semester.

By March 2020, the entire NYU team—and much of the world—was virtual. The pandemic had hit the United States, and the impact on New York City was significant. NYU had to figure out how to make everything remote. The university had the benefit of the Shanghai experience to drive this work.

Shifting in Real Time: Candidate Weekend, Abu Dhabi

Although NYU felt the tension between going virtual and managing to provide in-person learning for its Shanghai students, NYU had to move some initiatives to the virtual space. This brought on its own set of challenges. Since NYU's Abu Dhabi campus opened ten years ago, enrollment management has invited high achieving and diverse students from all over the world to campus as part of what it calls "Candidate Weekend"—an oppor-

tunity for admissions finalists to assess their interest in NYU and for the university to assess student “fit” for its community. Students learn about diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging and how those values are a core part of Abu Dhabi culture and the university. The enrollment management team produced three live events in the winter and shifted the last one to virtual, but all of the events delivered impact for students and insights for admissions staff. The experience in Shanghai provided a roadmap for how to handle Candidate Weekend.

Other challenges included:

- **Technology and Firewalls:** Not every country gives students full access to the internet, and if they were to be at an event that is important in their admissions process, staff had to consider this factor. Teams spent some time working with NYU’s information technology department and other university partners in Shanghai, Abu Dhabi, and New York City to create the technical platforms that would provide access to students.
- **Time Zones:** All of a sudden, NYU wasn’t flying students into a singular time zone. Some admissions events had to be asynchronous, while others had to be synchronous at a time that would be reasonable for all students to participate in a live event.

Those opportunities and challenges sparked great creativity. Teams quickly built a virtual event platform to host live virtual events, and they produced and curated videos to highlight the campus, student life, and academic experience. Students had the full schedule on their portal, and they could pick how to be involved in specific community events.

NYU used Candidate Weekend as a model as it continued to strategize throughout the spring. Teams considered Generation Z’s unique needs. Research shows that Generation Z spends a significant amount of free time online, with about one-third of incoming first-year students spending eleven or more hours per week on social media (Stolzenberg et al. 2019). To adjust to these evolving trends, research conducted by Beck and Wright (2019) suggests that colleges put information

that is critical to student success directly in front of them. It is important to meet students on channels where they spend their time, including social media, apps and SMS texting. It is also important to remember that hyper-personalized services designed to keep users on their respective platforms (such as Netflix and YouTube) have shaped the expectations of college-seeking students. These trends, combined with the positive Candidate Weekend experience, got NYU excited about shifting events in ways that worked for students, in their time zone, and on their schedule.

Key Lessons

Early on in the 2020–21 academic year, the NYU enrollment management team reflected on the series of events throughout a year full of unknowns and examined data from across its network. This work revealed new ways to be a connected, global network. Four lessons surfaced from this ongoing, evolving response to the pandemic:

Use Evidence to Maintain a “Students First” Mindset

Like universities across the world, as NYU started to go remote, it became harder to hear and see students’ needs. The lack of day-to-day interaction hampered enrollment management’s ability to identify students’ pain points and intervene where needed. Teams looked across the industry to find examples of how others worked to understand their communities during such a unique moment in time.

The student success team led the way, identifying new methods for checking the pulse of students with technology. This team crafted comprehensive “student voice surveys,” 90-second surveys designed to gather data about the NYU student experience in real time and be able to react and intervene almost immediately. The initiative became a six-part series—three in the fall of 2020 and three in the spring of 2021— that: gathered information and checked for understanding from students; identified student needs; and gauged students’ general sentiment toward the university. Parts of the survey asked about where students may need extra help. This enabled student success to employ its case man-

agement model to provide counseling and ease friction for students soon after pain points were identified. As of March 2021, 1,800 students had received personal outreach from student success specialists.

This ongoing data helped to identify and address the real needs of the community. For example, noting that nearly all respondents were concerned about others following social distancing guidelines, enrollment management developed an informational communications campaign for both parents and students to ease concerns and clearly articulate the university's strategies for ensuring compliance with COVID-19 distancing protocols.

The data resulted in three driving actions:

- Develop and promote diverse engagement opportunities for students, especially those studying remotely.
- Pay special attention to students studying remotely who overall reported feeling connected at a lower rate than others. These students would benefit from direct outreach to encourage participation.
- Reinforce academic help-seeking behavior by promoting academic resource utilization and academic support services.

To ensure that students have the full support of the university community, the student success team shared the student voice data with senior leadership and students' individual schools. The move to the virtual space has enhanced the identification and case management of distressed students in a more collaborative, comprehensive, and data-informed manner.

Leverage Regional Expertise

As a global university, NYU is able—and, indeed, has the responsibility—to lean on the cultural and language expertise of local staff on its campuses and satellite locations around the world. In 2020, the university learned that local staff could provide insight into managing the global crisis locally and assist in sharing critical information across an enrollment management team. With 22 percent of students studying internationally, a significant portion of the student body would not be able

to get to New York City. This required creative, flexible, and useful solutions to provide students with a semester that would work for them.

NYU's "Go Local" program was spearheaded by the university's Office of Global Programs to accommodate students beginning in the fall of 2020. This allowed students the option to choose to enroll in courses at an open global site so that they could continue their studies in person and from their home campus online. Go Local included the degree-granting campuses and the non-degree granting campuses. Students could live on campus and feel like they had some semblance of what they expected a college experience to be like. The largest site was in Shanghai, which was the first to re-open fully and where NYU more than doubled the student population.

NYU's established regional, global sites allowed students across the globe to remain a part of NYU and keep some normalcy during a difficult time. Leveraging the regional locations and expertise provided NYU a multitude of ways to think flexibly and boldly about the student experience in this new environment.

Establish Clear Communications and Priorities

As a global institution, there is an ever-present challenge of clear communications and aligned strategic priorities for staff. Now more than ever, removing silos and creating structures for clear internal and external messaging—alongside powerful storytelling—is essential. Enrollment managers are problem solvers. In a "normal" world, at a large research university, there is a lot of information that this division does not know about. Factoring in the COVID-19 responses and planning, there was an incredible shift that had to happen in timelines, processes, and new technologies. The university then needed to communicate those changes to students. There was a need to increase coordination efforts and to meet more regularly. On many occasions, staff had to nuance and alter communications based on the unique scenarios that the flexible options for students permitted. For example, a message to students in Abu Dhabi or at the Florence campus needed to be different from a message sent to students in New York City.

This “stakeholder alignment” effort resulted in the formation of a communicators team that met twice a week. These communicators previously informed processes and technology but without natural, or interlinked, reporting lines, so they did not always know what each other was doing. Enrollment management established this group across the global network to bring heightened coordination to all communications. The communicators team created and shifted timelines to ensure that students weren’t overwhelmed. From an enrollment management perspective, it required keeping an ear to the ground at all times. While other units communicated new policies and initiatives to support the return-to-campus efforts, enrollment management remained laser-focused on listening to students. Teams made sure that they knew how committed students were to returning in the fall, if they were struggling in any areas, and the ways to help. The goal was to be responsive to student needs and proactive in planning. This laid the groundwork for continued and improved collaboration for communication across the global network.

Act upon Core Values

Nearly all universities have core values in place. Students expect this, and with a clear strategy, universities can use these values to guide them during a crisis. NYU has long been dedicated to access, diversity, and academic excellence. It believes education is the engine of democracy and social mobility. It also believes deeply in equity, inclusion, and belonging, which is driven by the global student body. In the midst of a global pandemic, the United States—alongside many other countries—reckoned with systemic racism and social justice. Students, families, and communities demanded from higher education new actions, promises, and safe spaces for all students, especially Black and indigenous students and those of color. Teams across the university reflected on the ways that they could continue to work for change and how to demonstrate a commitment to social justice. This work is all part of what it means to be a global university.

University leaders came together to discuss how to affirm and strengthen the commitment to diversity. The

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Scholars Program was a natural area to focus on. For more than 30 years, the MLK Scholars Program at NYU had recognized and provided financial support to students who demonstrated a commitment to Dr. King’s legacy of social justice and change. MLK Scholars are change-makers and leaders. In 2020, NYU doubled the size of the program, starting with an additional investment of \$6 million. The expansion resulted in more scholarship funding, more student support, new programming opportunities, and new joint leadership from the offices of global inclusion and enrollment management. There is now financial support for research, travel, and internship opportunities, as well as leadership development throughout a student’s time at NYU. Additionally, MLK Scholars are given the opportunity in their first year to travel abroad with their cohort on a fully-funded trip to an international destination related to their research in the MLK seminar course.

Moving Forward

Higher education, as a whole, responded quickly and innovatively to the massive changes thrust upon its communities during the pandemic. And yet, there’s a shift coming that perhaps no one can predict but that leaders can now better prepare for by using the lessons they’ve learned (and continue to learn) from institutions’ collective COVID-19 responses. From student safety and health, to virtual learning and flexible semester options, what it means now to be a global university is far beyond what anyone would have stated in 2019. NYU learned some valuable lessons:

- Continue to ask, listen, and respond to student needs—and that is only possible with data, and lots of it.
- Leverage regional expertise in times of crises *and* in non-urgent times.
- Become more efficient in setting priorities, communicating, removing silos, and developing clear messages.
- Assess and act upon core values.

Enrollment management leaders understand that students are front and center. It is the job of enrollment

managers to operate in a global environment with collaboration and clear communication, even in the toughest of times. Across this industry, talent combined with opportunity will lead to tomorrow's innovations. What will recruitment look like? How will the field continue to improve student success? What does the creation of

trusted environments of inclusion and equity look and feel like? The global university—and enrollment management specifically—benefits from diversity, and there is so much strength in being connected to all corners of the world.

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Knoll-Finn drives evidence-based enrollment strategies that focus on attracting and shaping classes of diverse and academically promising students who will thrive at NYU and beyond.

She is a thought leader in the industry, with more than 30 years of experience. Prior to joining NYU, Knoll-Finn served as vice president of enrollment for Emerson College and dean of admissions at North-

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