

# TOP 50 VOICES IN STUDENT ENGAGEMENT



Campus Consultancy



# IRENE BENITEZ RODRIGUEZ

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**Programs Officer – Student Engagement**

Irene spent seven years in higher education managing study abroad programs, excelling in intercultural communication and project management. During the pandemic, she managed complex projects for a global train systems leader. Currently, she coordinates mentoring programs and industry events at the University of Sydney, Faculty of Science.



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## Can you share a bit about your background and the journey that led you to your current role in student engagement?

My academic journey began with a Bachelor's Degree in Business Administration and Management (BBAM), followed by a Master's in Project Management and a Certificate in Leadership & Individual and Organisational Behaviour. For six years, I worked for the Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE), the largest and oldest North American study abroad and intercultural exchange organization, in several international locations. During this time, I was responsible for designing and implementing co-curricular programs that fostered intercultural awareness and personal growth for students. I worked closely with a wide range of stakeholders, from students and academic staff to external partners and service providers. My expertise in strategic planning, budgeting, and project delivery was developed alongside my passion for creating enriching student experiences that catered to diverse needs.

After relocating to Sydney four years ago, I sought to continue my work in student engagement by joining the University of Sydney's Faculty of Science. **My international background has given me a deep understanding of the challenges students face as they transition to new environments.** My goal has always been to help them navigate these experiences. My experience in student services and project management skills, allows me to design, coordinate, and deliver high-impact programs that empower students to achieve academic and personal growth.

**“SUCCESS IN STUDENT ENGAGEMENT REQUIRES A UNIQUE BLEND OF TECHNICAL SKILLS, INTERPERSONAL QUALITIES, AND A DEEP UNDERSTANDING OF THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE”**



*April 2017, Chefchaouen (Morocco) - CIEE Business & Society Program participants exploring the "Blue City."*

## What achievement in your role related to student engagement and retention are you most proud of, and why does it stand out to you?

One of my proudest achievements occurred in 2019 when I was selected as the Program Coordinator for a summer study program at the University of Alcalá (UAH) in Madrid. UAH is a UNESCO World Heritage site and one of the oldest European universities, dating back to 1293. The program offered hundreds of American university students opportunities for cultural immersion and internships. I led the project, overseeing tasks such as creating the timeline, recruiting and training staff, coordinating housing with Spanish host families, and managing orientation logistics. This role required meticulous planning and leadership to ensure the program ran smoothly and on time.

The program's complexity and the need to address unexpected challenges, particularly concerning student mental health and safety, stand out to me. We encountered several incidents involving anxiety, stress, and crime that required swift action and the development of new protocols. The program succeeded through effective risk management and a focus on student well-being. **I was honoured with a nomination for the 2019 Global Honors Award by the International Employee Recognition Committee.** This recognition highlighted the program's impact on fostering cross-institutional cooperation and enhancing student experiences, making this accomplishment meaningful.

## In your opinion, what are the essential skills or qualities for someone to excel in the field?

**Success in student engagement requires a unique blend of technical skills, interpersonal qualities, and a deep understanding of the student experience.** One of the most critical skills is communication. Connecting with people from all walks of life, understanding their needs, and responding effectively is essential. It's about building lasting relationships and fostering an environment where students feel supported and empowered. This requires active listening, empathy, and emotional intelligence—qualities that help navigate students' challenges. I've found that understanding and responding to students' needs with compassion and care is just as important as ensuring the operational aspects of programs run smoothly.

Adaptability is also crucial, especially in an ever-changing educational environment. Whether managing crises, evolving programs to better serve students, or adopting new technologies, pivoting quickly and effectively is vital. My work with cross-cultural teams has taught me the value of flexibility and innovation in problem-solving, particularly when faced with new and unexpected challenges. Additionally, **leadership and team collaboration play a significant role in achieving success in student engagement.** Leading a team to deliver student-focused experiences requires a strong vision and the ability to motivate others to work towards a common goal.

Lastly, professional development and continuous learning are essential for staying relevant. I have completed training in intercultural development, mental health, safety, bystander intervention, and risk mitigation strategies to ensure I am equipped to handle the complexities of student engagement.



July 2019, Valencia (Spain) - CIEE Alcalá Summer Program students enjoying the vibrant culture of Valencia.



October 2017, Sevilla (Spain) - CIEE Liberal Arts Program group immersing in the rich history of Sevilla.

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