

MIAMI TODAY

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New Web site allows Latin students to apply to universities

By TOM HARLAN

A Miami entrepreneur recently launched a website to help Latin American students apply to Florida universities.

In September, Jose Ignacio Alvarez, a Colombia native who has lived in Miami for six years, launched UniversityPlacementServices.com, a site that translates admission information from Florida universities into Spanish for Latin American students.

The site breaks applications into a series of pages where students can get answers to their questions in Spanish and offers a service that translates education records required for admission to Florida schools.

Universities lack the time and resources to guide international students through the lengthy application process, said Alan L. Carsrud, executive director of Florida International University's Global Entrepreneurship Center. Having a site that provides all the information in one spot makes a difficult application process much easier for both parties, he said.

The site includes application information for FIU, the University of Miami, Florida State University, the University of Florida and the University of South Florida and is to add information for universities in New York, New Jersey and California within four months.

About 10% of FIU's enrollment is international students, according to school records.

"Education is an enormous industry in this city," Mr. Carsrud said. "Anything to get [international students] to apply to FIU is a big plus."

Increasing security measures have taken a toll on the multibillion-dollar international student industry, Mr. Carsrud said. Students are considering universities in other English-speaking countries to avoid US security hassles, he said.

According to a report by the Council of Graduate Schools, 90% of the nation's schools surveyed experienced a decrease in graduate school applications from international students this year.

"The rules and regulations have made it so onerous," Mr. Carsrud said. "There is an opportunity for Jose to help solve part of the problem."

Mr. Alvarez said he got the idea for the site after applying for a master's degree in



Universityplacementservices.com presents application information in Spanish.

engineering management at FIU in 1998. A Colombia native, he found the forms required more than a basic understanding of English and the universities kept returning his application due to errors.

After 9/11, he saw FIU professors and international students become frustrated with a newer, more complex system. When Congress passed the US Patriot Act, it provided funds for a program called Student and Exchange Visitor Information System, which requires universities to provide international student information to a data collection system.

In addition, new security procedures involved longer visa-processing and interview times. Mr. Alvarez said the university didn't have the time or resources to devote hours explaining the changes to each international student, and students are unwilling to pay large long-distance phone bills to fix application problems.

"I decided I had to do something about it," he said.

After recognizing a need for the service, Mr. Alvarez worked with four graduate students at FIU to develop a business plan and submitted it to the graduate version of FIU's new "venture challenge."

The challenge is an international business plan competition held by the Global Entrepreneurship Center through a partnership with the university's College of Business Administration and College of Engineering.

In May 2004, the group won the challenge and received \$15,000 in cash and \$4,000 in contributions for the plan.

Mr. Alvarez won the challenge because he had a functioning website, existing revenue, a business plan and a passionate team to make the business successful, Mr. Carsrud said.

But he needs capital and advisers to help take the website to the next level.

Mr. Carsrud said, adding that the site has gained some support and funding from the center's board of advisers.

Mr. Alvarez launched the site in September and plans to add more universities as the site gains financing. He also plans to meet with university officials and students in countries such as Colombia to improve the site.

He also hopes to establish partnerships with universities like FIU that would provide him with a percentage of tuition for every international student who enrolls through the site.

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