
STUDENT VOICES

A Survey of International Undergraduate Students' First-Year Challenges at the University of Minnesota - Twin Cities

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Abstract

This study reports on the responses of 232 international undergraduate students at the University of Minnesota who answered a survey about the challenges they faced in their first semester on campus. The survey questions focused on what made learning difficult, what major challenges international students recognized for students adjusting to studying at a large university, and what would help international students adjust more easily during their first year. Answers to both multiple response and open-ended questions were analyzed and four main themes emerged from the data. These themes include difficulties studying and learning in a second language, a lack of shared academic and classroom culture, feelings of isolation, and general cultural differences outside of academics. Sub-themes are also identified and recommendations and resources for addressing the main challenges students identified are provided.



Background

This study aims to better understand the challenges faced by first-year international students¹ studying at the University of Minnesota. The research project is a direct response to practitioner observations of adjustment difficulties of first-year international students across the University community and reports from University faculty and staff regarding similar concerns and observations.

Table 1. University of Minnesota international undergraduate enrollment

	International undergraduates	% increase from previous year
2009	1,411	
2010	1,834	29.98%
2011	2,282	24.42%

Data for the study was collected in Fall 2010. Increases in Table 1 match the trend of increasing undergraduate international student enrollments at higher education institutions across the United States, but the percentage increases demonstrate remarkable growth at the University of Minnesota. According to the Institute of International Education's (2011) Open Doors report, 723,277 international students were enrolled at U.S. institutions in the 2010-2011 school year, reflecting a 4.7% increase from the 2009-2010 year. Forty percent of this number, or 274,431, were enrolled at the undergraduate level, and undergraduate enrollments increased 6.2% from 2009-2010 to 2010-2011.

The research team recognized an opportunity to better understand the specific needs of the significantly growing population of international undergraduate students in order to facilitate their integration into the University community and to inform decisions related to policies, resources, and student services. The University of Minnesota's long-standing reputation for its innovations in, and commitment to, international education and the internationalization of higher education (Mestenhauser, 2011), further provided a rich context for the study.

The research project was conducted by staff members from:

- Minnesota English Language Program (MELP)
- Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL)
- International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS)
- Global Programs and Strategy (GPS) Alliance

Each member of the research team, including two doctoral students from the College of Education and Human Development, has significant professional experience working with international students in higher education settings. The presentation of this practitioner-based research is, therefore, designed to present key findings and themes, to discuss implications of the data, and to provide recommendations to University administrators, faculty, staff, and students, to maximize the presence of international undergraduate students on the UofM campus.

The study is primarily informed by two theoretical models. The first framework that informs international

¹The United States Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS, n.d.) defines international student status as “[a] nonimmigrant class of admission, an alien coming temporarily to the United States to pursue a full course of study in an approved program in either an academic...or a vocational or other recognized nonacademic institution.” This report specifically focuses on international students at the undergraduate level.



student adjustment is Berry's (1997, 2005) acculturation model. Berry suggests that whenever two or more cultural groups are in contact, a dual process of cultural and psychological changes takes place. Both groups experience change but the greater impact is on the individuals in the non-dominant group. When an individual encounters a new cultural group, he or she is expected to navigate changes in social structures, institutions, and cultural practices, as well as changes in personal behaviors. For international students, this means going through a continual process of determining the extent to which they want to maintain their own cultural identity. This is in juxtaposition to their preference for participating and developing relationships with the new cultural group. If mutual adaptation between the two cultures does not occur, international students are faced with the difficult choice of giving up their identity in order to fit in or the risk of being socially and culturally isolated. The extent of mutual adaptation impacts how much sociocultural and psychological stress students in the non-dominant group experience. Although acculturation impacts individuals primarily at the beginning, it is nevertheless is a long-term and demanding process.

The second framework, Tinto's (1987) model of student retention, focuses on the importance of having students integrate both academically and socially if they are to have long-term commitment and persistence at an institution. The result of students' feelings of being connected and included impacts not only retention but also the academic performance and intellectual development of students.

These two theoretical models combined shed light on the experiences faced by international students who, often through a second language, are adapting to living in a new country and adjusting to a new academic system. The process of acculturation for these students may heavily impact their ability to feel included and connected both academically and socially at the University of Minnesota.

It is well established in intercultural and educational literature that there are transitional issues associated with learning in a second language and culture. Previous studies have examined different facets of the international student experience and have identified language, academic adjustment, and integration or relationships within the local community as some of the primary challenges faced by international students (Justice & McLachlan, 2009; Montgomery, 2010; Robertson, Line, Jones, & Thomas, 2000; Sensyshyn, Warford, & Zhan, 2000; Yeh & Inose, 2003; Zhang & Mi, 2010).

Most of these studies highlight the experiences of non-native English speaking students studying in the United Kingdom or Australia. Fewer studies focus on international undergraduate students in the United States or have explored the specific context of the University of Minnesota. Through student voices, this study seeks to fill this gap and inform the curricular and co-curricular experiences involving undergraduate international students at the University of Minnesota.

Student voices emerged naturally from the survey responses to illustrate many aspects of the international student experience in the University of Minnesota community. While qualitative items were intentionally included in the survey instrument, the dimension and weight of their responses was unanticipated and too powerful not to highlight in the findings. Student comments naturally aligned with Cook-Sather's (2006) framework of voice as a call for rights and respect, and created an opportunity to "encourage reflection, discussion, dialogue and action on matters that primarily concern students, but also, by implication, school staff and the communities they serve" (Fielding & McGregor, 2005, as cited in Cook-Sather, 2006, p. 362). Providing a space for the international student voice on this campus thus became the focus, and title, of this



Methods

Design and respondents

The survey was designed to determine how international students perceive and describe the challenges they face during their first semester at the Twin Cities campus of the University of Minnesota. They were not asked what went well or what made their transition go smoothly. An initial draft of the survey instrument was piloted on non-native English-speaking students and staff members who provided feedback on content and clarity. The final survey (see Appendix A) was administered online to all international undergraduate students registered spring semester 2010. Of the 1,696 who received the email invitation to take the survey, 232 completed it.

Though the survey sample was somewhat limited, the respondents represented a variety of voices from across colleges, genders, and nationalities at the University.

Table 2. Respondent Demographics

College	Science and Engineering – 34% Liberal Arts – 28% Management – 11% Biological Sciences – 4% Continuing Education – 4% Design – 2% Education & Human Development – 2% Food, Agriculture, and Natural Sciences – 2% Medical School – < 1% Chose not to answer – 14%
How long have you studied in the U.S.?	0-12 months – 34% 13-24 months – 19% 25-36 months – 15% More than 3 years – 18% Chose not to answer – 14%
I first came to the University of Minnesota as a:	Freshman – 47% Transfer student – 28% Exchange student – 9% English Language Program Student – 2% Chose not to answer – 14%
What country are you from? (optional)	Chose not to answer – 43% People’s Republic of China – 17% Malaysia – 6% India, South Korea – 4% each < 4% each from countries in Africa, Europe, the Middle East, South America and the rest of Asia



Survey instrument

The survey consisted of twelve questions: one multiple option, eight multiple choice, and three open-ended. The multiple option/choice questions were designed to collect quantitative data about the role of English ability and academic differences in international student adjustment. The open-ended questions and comment boxes were included to capture in the students' own words the nuances and uniqueness of the challenges they faced, as well as to document those we hadn't yet asked about.

The survey was divided into four broad sections:

1. Your English Ability
 - Which of the following made learning difficult in your first semester due to your English? Please check all that apply even if was true only in one class. (Multiple option - 15 choices)
 - What other things made learning difficult? (Open-ended)
2. Comparing the University of Minnesota to Your Previous School (Multiple choice - all followed by open-ended comment boxes)
 - Attendance policy
 - Expectations for participating in class
 - Amount of homework
 - Types of assignments
 - Number of tests
 - Types of tests
3. Interacting with University of Minnesota Professors (Multiple choice - all followed by open-ended comment boxes)
 - During your first semester, if you had questions about the material or assignments, from whom did you generally prefer to get help?
 - During your first semester, if you had questions during class, when did you generally preferred to ask about them?
4. Your Suggestions (Open-ended)
 - What are the major problems you see for international students who are adjusting to being at the University of Minnesota?
 - What would help international students adjust more easily during their first year?

Data collection and analyses

The quantitative data were tabulated by the UM Survey tool in aggregate form. For the qualitative portion of the data, our initial analyses employed "open coding" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) which uses the participants' actual words or ideas to allow the themes to emerge inductively (Patton, 2002). The first round of coding included a professional evaluator whose expertise is outside the domain of international student education and services. In subsequent rounds of coding, themes were refined and then ranked according to frequency.



Findings

1. Challenges around learning in a second language

Overview and Key Findings

Since many international students have a first language other than English, part of the survey focused on aspects of language that are often challenging for this population. Students were asked both a multiple option question (students could choose all answers that applied) and a short answer question about how their abilities in English impacted their learning. Some of the language challenges students experienced during their first semester included lack of confidence using their English in class, the heavy reading load, and examples used in class drawn only from American culture.

1.1 Which of the following made learning difficult in your first semester due to your English?

Students were first asked about what aspects of using their second language made learning difficult. The percentages of responses to this multiple option question are listed in Table 2. The top five most frequently chosen responses were echoed in open-ended questions later in the survey. Forty percent of the respondents indicated that they were not comfortable speaking in class because of their English. Subsequent comments by respondents indicated that many students lack confidence in their English abilities, which affects their participation in class and group discussions. Over a third of the respondents also indicated that the reading load was challenging for them, and that often the examples used in classes were exclusively from the U.S. context. Over 30% of respondents indicated that unfamiliar vocabulary and their grammatical accuracy were also factors that made learning difficult for them during their first semester at the University.

Table 3. Summary of student responses to Question #1: Which of the following made learning difficult in your first semester due to your English? Please check all that apply even if it was true in only one class.

Answer	Count	Percentage
1. I was not comfortable speaking in class because of my English.	92	40%
2. There was too much reading.	81	35%
3. Too many examples used in class were taken from U.S. culture.	79	34%
4. Too much of the vocabulary was unfamiliar.	75	32%
5. My writing had too many grammar errors.	70	30%
6. I wasn't clear about what to do during pair work or group work.	68	29%
7. Professors/instructors spoke too quickly.	65	28%
8. I was unfamiliar with the types of writing assignments.	52	22%
9. I didn't understand other students during pair work or group work.	51	22%
10. People could not understand me when I spoke.	46	20%
11. The professors/instructors didn't provide enough visual material (e.g. writing or slides) while teaching.	42	18%
12. The directions given for writing assignments were unclear to me.	42	18%
13. I couldn't understand the reading material.	37	16%
14. I didn't have any of these problems.	34	15%
15. I couldn't understand my classmates.	29	13%



1.2 What other things made learning difficult?

In addition to the multiple option question, students were asked the open-ended question, “What other things made learning difficult?” Sixteen percent of the respondents (37 students) answered this question. The responses were grouped into the themes below. Some responses were coded into multiple categories.

Themes

- Adapting to U.S. classroom culture, methods, and educational structure
Several students described difficulties understanding the expectations of the U.S. classroom and adapting to those differences. Students cited types of tests, teaching styles of professors, large class sizes, and the relationship between the lectures, readings, and assessments as being challenges for them.

One student wrote:

Professors didn't understand that international students need more time to get used to the american way of teaching.²

Other students noted:

[[It's definitely that some professors never write enough on the white board and just keeps talking. it's so hard for us to write that down to make good note of lecture.

Size of the classrooms was another thing that was challenging. Some lecture groups were too large, which makes to interact with the instructor.

- Feeling excluded or isolated
Six responses to this open-ended question reflected a feeling of being excluded from class activities or the academic community, which was also echoed in other parts of the survey. Some students cited feelings of isolation due to their own shyness or lack of understanding of how to make connections. Other students felt that because they were international students or non-native speakers they were excluded or marginalized by peers or instructors. Some examples were:

The most difficult thing for me was getting integrated in class. It was easy for my teachers to ignore/not include me in discussions etc. I was shy and not comfortable with my English, but still, in small discussion classes the teacher could include you more.

Many of students tend to make their own group and do not allow some international students to be in the group because they think that international students don't know how to speak english.

²Student responses have not been edited for grammar, capitalization, or punctuation.



Coming to terms with the completely different culture!!! Though this was to be expected. This didn't make learning difficult for me as much as it made me feel a little bit lonely due to me not mixing too much with the people!

- Perception of lack of help/caring/fairness

Several students perceived a lack of help, caring, or fairness from their instructors, teaching assistants, or other staff at the University. Comments in this category ranged from teaching assistants being too picky about grammatical mistakes to peers not listening to them during group work.

Last semester, I had difficult time taking science class. Reading materials were so vague and the lecture didn't cover them. It was two different subject. Since the lecture was sooo big (700 students at least) I wanted to have printed slides of the lecture so that I can just write down what my professor said. In this case, I learn more and understand better. However, this professor didn't allow it so that now only international students but also national students had difficult time writing down stuff while listening a professor's lecture...TA seems he or she didn't care about student's difficulty but just encourage to study more.

- Other issues

Other language issues that were reiterated in the open-ended responses included a lack of confidence in their language abilities, difficulties speaking up in group work, challenges learning technical vocabulary, and the amount of time it took to complete reading assignments.

On the topic of confidence, one student stated:

Lack of courage to speak up in class. Fear of making a fool of myself among students whose native language is English.

In regards to completing reading assignments, one student commented:

International students cannot read fast in English. (I found out it only takes my American friend and hour and a half to read and understand a chapter which takes me five or six hours) For reading chapters, I can always spend more time, but during exams when I can't have more time, it has been very difficult.

In addition to language issues, students also mentioned the differences in background knowledge between them and their American peers. Some reported difficulty understanding the accents of non-native English speaking or non-American English speaking instructors.

Three students stated that they didn't have any problems with language their first year on campus in response to the open-ended question. Fifteen percent selected "I didn't have any of these problems" in the multiple option question.



2. Comparing the University of Minnesota to your previous school

Overview and Key Findings

Respondents were asked several multiple choice questions that compared the University of Minnesota with their previous home institution in terms of class participation, attendance, amount of homework, and number of tests. Students were further asked whether or not they were familiar with the types of tests and assignments they encountered during their first semester at the University of Minnesota. Although the responses indicate differences on all of these dimensions, only class participation emerged in the qualitative data as a major challenge for international students.

2.1 Comparing class participation

Forty percent of respondents reported that less participation was expected at their previous educational institutions (see table 4).

Table 4. Expectations for participating in class

Answer	Percentage
1. In my previous school, <u>less</u> participation was expected than here.	40%
2. Expectations are about the same.	32%
3. In my previous school, more participation was expected than here.	18%
4. Other	1%
5. No answer	1%

2.2 Comparing attendance

Fifty-nine percent of respondents reported coming from schools where attendance was required (see Table 5). However, attendance was not identified in the open-ended questions as an adjustment challenge.

Table 5. Attendance policy

Answer	Percentage
1. In my previous school, attending classes was always/usually <u>required</u> .	59%
2. There's no major difference between here and my previous school.	20%
3. In my previous school, attending classes was always/usually <u>optional</u> .	11%
4. Other	1%
5. No answer	1%
6. Non completed	8%



2.3 Comparing the amount of homework and types of assignments

Nearly half of the respondents (48%) reported having less homework in their previous schools (see Table 6), and 41% reported that they were often not familiar with the types of assignments they received in their first semester at the University of Minnesota (see Table 7).

Table 6. Amount of homework

Answer	Percentage
1. In my previous school, there was <u>less</u> homework.	48%
2. In my previous school, there was <u>more</u> homework.	20%
3. It's about the same	20%
4. Other	2%
5. No answer	2%
6. Non completed	8%

Table 7. Types of assignments

Answer	Percentage
1. In my first semester here, I was <u>usually familiar</u> with the types of assignments given in classes.	47%
2. In my first semester here, I was often NOT familiar with the types of assignments given in classes.	41%
3. Other	1%
4. No answer	2%
5. Non completed	8%

2.4 Comparing the number and types of tests

Student responses to questions about the number and types of tests are shown in Tables 8 and 9. Nearly half of the respondents (49%) had fewer tests in their previous schools, and 34% said that they were often not familiar with the types of tests given at the University of Minnesota during their first semester.

Table 8. Number of tests

Answer	Percentage
1. In my previous school, there were <u>fewer</u> tests.	49%
2. In my previous school, there were <u>more</u> tests.	18%
3. It's about the same	22%
4. Other	1%
5. No answer	2%
6. Non completed	8%

Table 9. Types of tests

Answer	Percentage
1. In my first semester here, I was <u>usually familiar</u> with the types of tests given in classes.	56%
2. In my first semester here, I was <u>often NOT familiar</u> with the types of tests given in classes.	34%
3. Other	0%



3. Interacting with University of Minnesota professors and staff

Overview and Key Findings

The survey asked respondents to answer two multiple choice questions about their preferences for getting course-related help during their first semester. The questions in this section were designed to identify areas in which international students and their professors or instructors may have different preferences and expectations about from whom and when students should seek assistance. International students tended to prefer to ask questions to professors and teaching assistants immediately after class or during office hours.

3.1 Preferences for whom to ask for help

As seen in Table 10, most students in their first semester preferred to ask the professor for help, followed by preferences for the teaching assistant and other students.

Table 10. Preferences for getting course-related help. During my first semester, if I had any questions about the material or assignments, I generally preferred to get help from:

Answer	Percentage
1. the professor	38%
2. the teaching assistant	28%
3. other students	19%
4. Other	3%
5. my advisor	1%
6. No answer	< 1 %
7. Non completed	11%

3.2 Preferences for when to ask for help

Students were asked when they preferred asking questions that they had during class. Eighty percent of respondents preferred to delay asking class-related questions until a later time (see Table 11). Forty-one percent of respondents preferred to ask questions immediately after class. Only 7% preferred to ask their questions during class time.

Table 11. Asking course-related questions. During my first semester, if I had questions during class, I generally preferred to ask:

Answer	Percentage
1. immediately after class	41%
2. later, during office hours	21%
3. later, by email	18%
4. during class	7%
5. Other	3%
6. No answer	< 1%
7. Non completed	11%



4. What are the major problems you see for international students adjusting to being at the University?

Overview and Key Findings

The second open-ended question of the survey was “What are the major problems you see for international students who are adjusting to being at the University of Minnesota?” One hundred forty-two people responded to this question (61%). Four main themes emerged from the comments:

- challenges of studying and participating in a second language
- lack of shared academic and classroom culture
- feelings of isolation and exclusion
- general cultural differences

The first three themes mirrored the student responses to the first open-ended question, “What other things made learning difficult?”

4.1 Challenges of studying and participating in a second language

Respondents' comments to this open-ended question provided further insight to the responses to the multiple option question about studying in a second language. Many students had difficulties or lacked confidence in expressing themselves in front of groups, which impacted their participation in discussions and asking for help. Others articulated a realization that being an active learner in their second language required some adjustment during the first semester.

One respondent explained:

International students go to universities in US because they can communicate in English better than those who cannot go. However, sometimes they are frustrated in classes because they realize they can't communicate as well as native students. Sometimes they just simply don't understand the material. Admitting this fact is hard. Telling the professors is even harder. So, they don't participate..making students participate, I believe, is something that every international students fear the most in class.

Some students, however, pointed to specific aspects of language that they found challenging. Reasons for not understanding their classmates, teaching assistants and professors included native speakers speaking very quickly, using slang, using culturally specific examples, or international students not understanding key academic vocabulary. As one student stated:

Some assignments contain a lot of slang which I am not familiar with.

Beyond their second language abilities, many students also cited a general lack of confidence in their English. One student with a relatively high English test score articulated this struggle:

The main problem is speaking out in class. I seriously felt goosebumps even if I scored 105 in TOEFL. It's not about knowing English. It's about the anxious feeling that whether what you are speaking is important enough to ask in a class and whether the professor and other students can understand.



Some respondents also expressed that international students' lack of confidence might be mistaken as a lack of ability or motivation. As one respondent commented:

I have difficulty participating in class discussion because of fear in English speaking and my performance was sometimes wrongly took by the professor saying that I was not motivated in learning.

Another common theme of second language adjustment was difficulty in keeping up with the amount of reading and writing.

For some writing assignments, since [international students] could not write as fast as their classmates, they often spent much more time in writing and checking grammatical mistakes.

4.2 Lack of shared academic and classroom culture

Other often-mentioned problems related to the students' lack of shared academic and classroom culture with that of the University. Students had a hard time understanding the educational system in general, and also the expectations from the professors and staff. One respondent commented:

The system here in US is quite different from the system we had in my home country. Adjusting to the learning system here makes the major problem for international students.

Another stated:

Professors don't seem to understand that we need extra help from them and we need a little bit more time to get used to their expectations.

Respondents provided examples of how the U.S. educational system was unfamiliar in terms of class participation, presentations, group work, and how to engage in their college experience. As one respondent said:

Generally speaking, we tend not to voice out our opinions or query due to many reasons: such as culture (it's rude to interrupt during lectures).

From my point of view, most international students (especially those from asian backgrounds) tend to spend much more time in studying than in trying out all the possible opportunities to participate in campus life or research labs. And by the time they became aware of that, it was too late to start out and change their lifestyles.

Students also experienced differences in professors' teaching styles, grading systems and in the frequency of assignments, tests, and quizzes. One respondent suggested that a communication gap with professors also exists:

Getting acquainted with a professor personally is the most difficult thing for an



international student here. One on one communication gap with professor widens more due to obvious cultural differences and subsequent hesitation arising from it.

Beyond the system of education, a lack of familiarity with U.S. culture also impacted students' understanding of course content. International students found themselves trying to understand all of the American cultural references used by instructors in class. As one student stated:

Examples made in class by students and professors often refer to strictly American things - certain TV shows, series, American sports, etc, which don't make sense to international students.

Theme 4.3: Feelings of isolation and exclusion

Twenty-three respondents commented specifically on a feeling of isolation from U.S. students. The main reason given for the isolation was a difference in cultural background or understanding. Respondents' feelings are expressed in the following quotes:

Most probably [the major problem for adjusting is] the ability to fit in with local students. There are, many times too much culture difference between the respective nationality and the American, which become the biggest obstacle to become close with local students. As a result, most international students only mingle with students of their own nationality or other foreign students, especially students from Asian countries.

It's too difficult to get involved in US culture, hard to take part in the discussion, hard to understand examples from US culture or language. Being shy, lonely and unconfident.

Although the number of international students are big enough, I always have felt that international students and local students from Minnesota are not well integrated. A lot of people see me as an Asian before they see me as a human being. So when I walk on a street, I would hear random white students saying "ni hao" or "gon ni ji wa" to me even though I'm not a Chinese or a Japanese. International students always have this small American Dream of having a lot of American friends and being well-adjusted to American culture but the truth is, it's very hard. So I have seen many of them giving up, while keeping this hatred within them. It affects their academic careers, too because they try to avoid meeting with Americans. They would not participate very much during group study/group assignments.

While the previous comments suggest that the isolation comes from cultural misunderstandings and the



discouragement that can result, one respondent also pointed out that a lack of meaningful opportunities to interact can exacerbate feelings of isolation:

Another problem was in socializing with the local students. Outside the classroom every local student is busy in their jobs and there is no real forum or platform to go to and develop an understanding with the locals.

A result of the isolation between international students and U.S. students noted by many respondents is a preference for students to stay within their own cultural groups. They attributed this pattern to language differences, lack of cultural understanding, or students being ethnocentric. The following comment articulates this feeling.

When students are out of school, they go back dorm or apartments, but they still hang out with their country's friends and speak their language. This means that they only use the language, English, at class but not in daily life.

Numerous respondents described the isolation between the groups as "not fitting in," as illustrated in the following two responses:

I think that was my biggest challenge studying here. Although I was doing okay academically, I always had unhappiness, anger, and shame because I wasn't fitting in. Around me, it always seems to try to tell me that something American is cool, and not becoming Americanized is unacceptable. I have talked to many international students and many of them feel the same way.

Students are scared of each other; to some americans we are scary strangers, and to most internationals they are scary americans who speak better English than we do.

Theme 4.4: General cultural differences

General cultural differences emerged as the fourth theme from the open-ended responses. This theme included comments regarding differences in values, negative perceptions of international students by domestic students and instructors, difficulty making connections at a large school, insufficient support, financial aid issues, climate, and housing.

Survey respondents recognized differences in values beyond the classroom environment. Statements of this nature included:

Sometimes international students feel that part of US culture (especially pop culture) is aggressive and put too much stress on individualism.

People not knowing how/ what to react/ what to say to us [international students]. Assumptions that local students make about international students, which are often unflattering.

I founds many Americans who expected everyone to be familiar with their culture and if not considered them uneducated or ignorant. While many are warm and



friendly, the mindset that everyone should know about America and the hesitation to learn about other cultures was a little annoying at times.

In addition to providing respondents with the opportunity to identify the challenges and problems international students face in their first semester at the University of Minnesota, we sought to gather respondents' suggestions for how faculty, staff, and other students could support new international students' acculturation and transition.

5. What would help international students adjust more easily during their first year?

Overview and Key Findings

The third open-ended question of the survey was "What would help international students adjust more easily during their first year?" Two hundred and twenty-six respondents (97%) answered this question. Respondents provided feedback for faculty, staff, and future international students on how the transition into the University could be eased for international students, and for how the University community could benefit from further integration of international students. Recommendations for faculty and staff were:

- create structured opportunities for integration
- be aware of the cultural background differences within the classroom setting
- encourage international students to utilize campus resources

Advice for future international students centered on:

- ways to navigate differences in academic and classroom culture
- tips for general cultural and social adjustment

5.1 Create structured opportunities for integration

Thirty-four respondents commented that more structured opportunities between U.S. and international students would help them in their adjustment. Through socialization they could share one another's cultures, develop friendships, and build English language skills. As one respondent stated:

I think [international students] need some activities to help them to know the culture here and help them improve English. Sometimes they want to involve more but they are not confident and have no idea about how to involve more!!

Respondents suggested structured opportunities such as small group discussions, peer-to-peer programs, or study groups as possible examples. Fourteen respondents suggested a college-based peer mentor program. One respondent described it this way:

I believe help from people that have already been in shoes of freshmen could help freshmen the most because they know what being a freshman is like. So having study group (grouping in same major would be perfect) would be great like mentor system. Please select some one who cares about freshmen, not with just good grade.



The respondents recognized existing on-campus opportunities for interaction, and encouraged incoming international students to take advantage of extracurricular activities to support their adjustment and learning. One student advised:

Don't be afraid of talking to other American students in the class! Try to improve English through some club activities.

Similarly, one respondent addressed how opportunities for integration need to include international and domestic students:

Having a large number of international students at the university does not make the campus diverse. How well international students are integrated into the rest of the campus matters more. The help seems to be always focused only on the international students and their problems, while the rest of the campus should also be involved to help them. In my opinion, studying at the U of M forces international students to be adjusted and to change themselves to fit into the American culture. However, international students grew up in different cultural backgrounds; compromise might work, but demanding them to change and fit into American society might be asking too much, especially when students are just starting their first year.

This respondent goes on to suggest how the University can be supportive:

I think Americans at the U need to be educated to be more open to people from other cultures. They need to learn to have patience and understanding for people who are not Americanized, and in fact, who don't have to be Americanized. After I realized it is okay for me to not act completely like an American, I gained confidence and started to really like my life at the U.

5.2 Awareness of academic differences and support

Respondents frequently commented on the need for professors and teaching assistants to be more aware of the specific academic challenges that international students face as they adapt to the U.S. higher education system. These suggestions pointed to a strong interest in creating stronger connections with instructors. Suggestions from respondents included:

- *The professor speaks [more] slowly*
- *Don't use slang while teaching or making assignments.*
- *I think lecturers can ask if everyone knows what they are talking about when they decide to give specific examples. Also, one day it would be nice to experience an*



international student day.

- *..more love and interest from the teachers.*

Based on the differences in academic systems across cultures, several international students suggested that professors and TAs could be more explicit in their expectations of the academic classroom culture.

For example, one respondent noted:

It would help if teaching staff clearly and several times explained how to address them and when can we ask for help (whether it is okay to interrupt and ask what is unclear right away or wait till the end of class).

Another respondent pointed to difference in expectations for student presentations:

Maybe the professor could explain what is expected of oral activity in class. Because it is very different from class to class, and many students come from places where you're not expected to say anything in class.

Several respondents also suggested that it would be helpful for instructors to provide a preview of their lectures before class.

5.3 Utilizing campus resources

Respondents strongly encouraged instructors to help students build awareness and encourage the use of campus resources. Many respondents pointed out that it was difficult to know what resources were available and when to utilize them. One explained:

It is important for international students to know all the organizations in school. There were a lot of times when I did not know which organization I could turn to for help or which one's I could get easily involved with.

Another stated:

Let them be aware of school resources like The Writing Center and push push push that it's free and VERY helpful.

5.4 Peer advice for new international students: Academics

Respondents provided feedback on what new international students could do to improve their transition to the U.S. higher education system. They suggested that consulting with professors and teaching assistants, though difficult, best facilitated their academic transition. One respondent stated:

Read more and ask more to the instructor. I clearly know that it's going to be hard for the first time, but if you don't ask you are the one who'll suffer from it.



Another respondent agreed:

Talk to the professor about the subjects if they not understand because sometimes professor do not realize if the international students have difficulty to understand the lecture.

Many suggested that new international students meet regularly with their instructors. One respondent shared how it helped in his situation:

I think office hours of professor would be the best way to adjust the class. In my case, I could get a helpful information about participating the class.

Respondents also encouraged other students to consult with academic advisors for understanding the choices of classes and resources around campus, and using the Graduation Planner tool.

5.5 Peer advice for new international students: Tips for adjustment

Many respondents felt that new students themselves were responsible for their adjustment by just trying harder or being more open-minded. Some comments that illustrate this point are:

- *[They need to] try to face their fears as that's the only way they will feel comfortable.*
- *Be brave.*
- *The willingness to learn a new way of doing things has done wonders for me.*

The three main suggestions for new students were to join more social activities, participate in more conversations, and socialize beyond their own cultural groups. Respondents believed that through these interactions, new international students might build more confidence in themselves and find support as they adjust to life on campus.



Discussion

This study was undertaken to give voice to international undergraduate students at the University of Minnesota and to better understand the challenges they face. We found that these challenges focused around four major themes:

1. challenges of studying and participating in a second language
2. a lack of shared academic and classroom culture
3. feelings of isolation and exclusion
4. general cultural differences

While some of these themes are not surprising, the details included in the student responses provide insight into the undergraduate international student experience. These findings point to areas where the first year experience for these students can be improved.

We anticipated that language would be a challenge for students in their first semester at the University, and we found that to be true. For most students there is a period of adjustment when transitioning into full-time study in a second language. Speaking up in front of a class (even to ask a question), dealing with the processing time needed for the reading load, and coping with vocabulary and grammar issues were among the most often cited language issues. Students also pointed out that references and examples derived from American culture made comprehension challenging.

These language challenges do not appear to be isolated to students with lower levels of proficiency. Even students with high English proficiency stated how it took great confidence to speak up in class during their first semester at the University. In addition to skill building, there is a transition period for students during which they gain confidence in their language abilities, adjust, and learn what is expected in terms of language at the University.

Although some language issues are related to transition, others represent greater language deficiencies that can be addressed through coursework or accommodations. English as a second language (ESL) classes, conversation partners, and other resources can help students build confidence and improve their skills in the language. Ensuring that all students know how to access the language learning resources available to them can help ease their transition into the University and allow them to more quickly become active participants in their courses and study groups.

When an international student struggles in their coursework, it is easy to jump to the conclusion that it is a lack of language ability that is the cause of the problem. Sometimes that is the case, however, sometimes language is just part of the issue or not the issue at all. As we saw in student responses to this survey, there are many other challenges that students face. Some of these challenges are the same ones that native English speaking students face, such as a lack of study skills or social adjustment when entering the University. Other challenges are unique to international students, but are not directly related to language, such as cultural adjustment. The responses in this survey demonstrate that there are many areas we need to consider beyond language when an international student struggles so that we can best help them address their challenges.

A lack of shared academic and classroom culture was the second major theme to emerge in the student responses to this survey. International students arrive on campus to an entirely new educational system for them. They have to acculturate and make adjustments in order to navigate the demands of new social, physical, and academic systems.



The survey data indicate that international students often approach asking questions in class differently, particularly when students want to ask questions and whom they want to ask. Students also identified differences from their home culture to the amounts and types of participation expected, the amount of homework, how one addresses a professor, the ways in which students are assessed, the exclusive use of American culture-based examples in class, and attendance policies at the University. These differences caused stress and a perception of unfairness if students came from cultures that had different classroom norms.

Students also voiced concerns about knowing how to make connections with classmates and instructors. Group work was challenging to some students. Creating these classroom connections are important so that students can engage with classmates out of class to study or form project groups. Engaging international students from the beginning of their time on campus, and educating them about the importance of group work if it plays a large role in a course, could help them feel more engaged.

A theme that strongly emerged in the data was that of students feeling isolated or excluded. Unprompted by our quantitative questions, this theme emerged from the open-ended questions on the survey. Different factors seem to contribute to this. They include students not feeling welcomed to take part in discussions and social events, not knowing how to take the initiative in social interactions, focusing too much on academics and not making social connections during their first year on campus, and a perceived reluctance by domestic students to engage with international students.

Student respondents specifically asked for structured opportunities for cross-cultural interaction with domestic students. Making connections on campus can impact student retention rates (see Rather & Harter, 2010; Lopez & Louis, 2009; Snyder, et al., 2002) and help students to feel more connected to their learning community. Research in the area of intercultural relational theory suggests that supportive, respectful relationships are essential to well-being and development (Miller, 1976; Comstock, 2005; Comstock, et al., 2008), and are important for international students (Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002). Simply bringing international students to campus does not necessarily create an environment for cross-cultural interaction to take place, and students recognized this. Meaningful relationships need to be nurtured with specific opportunities developed for domestic and international students in and out of the classroom.

In addition to the themes above, students also cited general cultural differences that made it challenging to adapt during their first semester or year on campus. In this regard, it is important to keep in mind that in addition to living in a new cultural and linguistic context, international students, like most students, are adapting to managing their time, a new transportation system, perhaps a new climate, and developing new social connections. All of these factors can create challenges for students. Helping them navigate these challenges can help them succeed at the University.

In this study we asked international students about challenges so that we could better understand their concerns, create a dialogue around the first-year international student experience, and better support international students at the University. Some students recognized that they have a responsibility to adapt, while others want to retain aspects of their cultural identity and value systems. Students also provided many good suggestions on how the University community can aid them in their academic success and transition to campus life. The final section of this report outlines our recommendations based on the survey findings for University administration, as well as for those who directly serve students through instructional and service roles.



Recommendations

The University's educational mission is to recruit, educate, challenge, and graduate outstanding students who become highly motivated lifelong learners, leaders, and global citizens (Regents of the University of Minnesota, 2011). For our students to become global citizens it requires our faculty, staff and students to develop a global competency skill set. Global competency was defined by the University community as "demonstrating the knowledge, skills and perspectives necessary to understand the world and work effectively to improve it" (Global Programs and Strategy Alliance, 2010). In this regard, international student perspectives are critical to our classrooms, our curriculum and our campus life. While 27% of University of Minnesota-Twin Cities students study abroad, the other 73% of students may only have a chance to explore global perspectives through relationships with international students and staff. Research indicates that intentionally supporting domestic and international student interactions are important in developing the cognitive skills, effective communication skills, and cultural awareness (Arkoudis, et al., 2010) of all students.

Solidifying a strong common vision, goals and outcomes for the internationalization of the campus and curriculum is central to understanding the value that international students add to our classrooms and campus. Intentional decision-making will enable the University to create an engaging climate not only for international students but for all members of the University.

The survey data suggest that concrete steps can be taken by the University to create a climate in which faculty, staff, and students value the presence of international students, recognize their adjustment challenges, and are able to assist them in navigating cultural differences to improve and maximize their first-year experience on our campus.

Institutional Recommendations

Encourage Mutual Adaptation.

International students are better able to integrate and contribute to the University when it is open and inclusive of cultural diversity. Berry's (2001) work on acculturation suggests that mutual adaptation is a two-way exchange that allows new students to simultaneously learn the ways of a new culture, and how to be effective in that culture, while also maintaining their cultural integrity. For mutual adaptation to occur it is necessary for international students to become familiar with and adapt to the basic values of the receiving society, while the University community adapts to better meet the needs of all groups. If a mindset for a two-way learning process does not exist, students may either isolate themselves or lose their ability to openly share their perspectives (Berry, 2005). Hammer (2008) asserts that a mutual adaptation approach provides a foundation for "the search for and consequently a deeper recognition of" (p. 255) cultural resources within an institution. At all levels of the University, mutual adaptation is required in order for students to be able to maintain their cultural identity while building relationships and a collaborative body of knowledge in a new cultural context.

How to infuse the recommendation:

Infusing a climate of mutual adaptation requires commitment during visioning, strategic planning, policy creation and resource allocation. It rewards learning environments where differing cultural perspectives are seen as a critical component to success rather than an obstacle to success.

Current models of success:

Career and Internship Services (formerly the St. Paul Campus Career Center) provides one example of a unit on campus that has fostered a climate of mutual adaptation. Through their individual experiences with students they became aware that a standard approach did not meet the needs of all their students.



In 2007, with help from staff from International Student and Scholar Services, they embarked on a year-long experiential process of building the cultural self-awareness of their office staff. They began working diligently to assess their outreach to diverse populations and integrated individual cultural competency goal setting into their performance review process. They began to frame their work as understanding how the students would like to be guided through career counseling conversations rather than how staff would like to guide them in the conversation. Sara Newberg, Director of the St. Paul Career Center, emphasizes that by integrating an intercultural mindset into their existing structure they are better able to make the cognitive shifts necessary to work with a wider audience of students.

Other examples of units that have undergone a process of evaluating their capacity for mutual adaptation include the Office of Equity and Diversity, Student Affairs Directors, the Undergraduate Leadership Minor, University Libraries, and the Carlson School of Management Student Services.

Build Collaborations.

As there is an increasing demand on units to meet the needs of a diverse student population, engaging international students within colleges, departments, and student service units can be achieved more effectively through collaborative efforts. As these students interact across the entirety of campus life, the curricular and co-curricular learning of all students can be enhanced through campus collaborations.

How to infuse the recommendation:

Collaboration can start with including internationally-focused offices, faculty, and staff in campus discussions. These offices can provide critical insight about how to start a discussion around engaging international students, what resources are available or needed, models of success and ways to effectively measure outcomes. Likewise, when internationally-focused offices are involved in the discussion they can better support the international student population through greater awareness of and connections to other campus entities.

Current models of success:

Models of successful collaborations among colleges and departments include the International Programs Council, the International Student Liaison Committee, the Global Leadership Program, the International Student College and Student Services Liaisons, the English as a Second Language Council, and Student Mental Health Committee. Successful collaborations at the student engagement level include the New International Student Seminar and the Tandem Plus Language Program.

Assess Inclusion and Engagement.

Assessing the inclusion and engagement of international students in departments, programs, services, and opportunities provides a baseline for all units. Based on student feedback, it is critical to explore the barriers and opportunities for improving their inclusion within the academic environment. Assessment includes not just international students' academic success, but their sense of being recognized as individuals who are being integrated and successfully transitioned into their college experience. U.S. American students also provide significant insight as to whether they feel a sense of engagement with those who are culturally different from themselves.

How to infuse the recommendation:

Periodic evaluation of the students' experiences within your college, department, or classroom are essential. Culturally inclusive environments foster greater awareness, acceptance of difference and embracing ambiguity. Assessing global competency outcomes should occur for both international and domestic students.



Current models of success:

Two means of assessing inclusion and engagement currently being used on campus are the analysis of University-wide surveys and unit based focus groups.

The Office of Institutional Research (OIR) and the Office of Undergraduate Education have collaborated to look at trends in campus-wide data sets related to students' global competency development. Recently, they used the Student Experience in the Research University survey to demonstrate how students' engagement in curricular and co-curricular global and intercultural activities can enhance associated competencies, ability to work with people from other cultures, understanding of the complexities of global issues, and ability to apply disciplinary knowledge in global contexts. Furthermore, OIR is currently supporting International Student and Scholars Services as they look specifically at the international student experience. As OIR supports the collection of institutional-level data related to students' engagement, belonging, and satisfaction they can help support the work of campus units and programs through survey administration and data analysis.

The Carlson School of Management Undergraduate Programs Office, in collaboration with their Undergraduate Business Career Center, has facilitated international student-specific focus groups for the last two years. The majority of focus groups held encompass all students, but Carlson staff recognized the importance of understanding international students' unique perspectives. Based on student feedback, the Carlson School enhanced their services to the international student population. They have used the feedback from students to create college-based programs around the three main challenges international students face: (1) Networking and relationship-building with faculty, (2) Early learning and preparation for internship and job search, and (3) Breaking down different cultural styles of communication and increasing self-awareness to understand the impact of intercultural communications on a global scale. All three sessions include either U.S. faculty or students as way to bridge cultural differences between all groups.

Invest in Faculty and Staff Development.

International students in the survey strongly recommended that faculty and staff become aware of cultural differences and how these differences impact learning. Leask (2009) states that "academic staff must themselves be highly efficient and effective intercultural learners with the skill to engage with and utilize diversity to develop their own and their students' international perspectives." Across the institution, existing faculty and staff development should be infused with inclusive teaching practices, an understanding of the unique needs of international students, and how to create the structured opportunities for cross-cultural interaction needed to bring forward the value of differing cultural perspectives. By exploring the international student experience with faculty and staff, they are able to build their cultural self-awareness, develop the tools needed to reduce educational barriers, and maximize the unique opportunities these students bring to the educational environment.

How to infuse the recommendation:

Embed the concepts of Universal Design for Instruction (an inclusive approach to teaching and course planning that benefit a broad range of learners [Scott, McGuire, & Embry 2002]), mutual adaptation and cultural inclusiveness into existing faculty and staff development. Support both short-term and long-term opportunities within the colleges and student services units which provide easy to access professional development opportunities.

Current models of success:

An excellent example of investment in faculty development with multidisciplinary and system-wide reach is the Internationalizing Teaching and Learning cohort program sponsored by the Global Programs and



Strategy Alliance in partnership with UMTC's Center for Teaching and Learning, Office of Information Technology, and UMD's Instructional Design Services. As part of the significant course design process these faculty undertake to internationalize their curricula, there is an explicit and ongoing exploration of the unique needs and untapped potential of international students in their courses and programs.

The College of Agriculture and Natural Resource Sciences (CFANS) also serves a model of success as they provide a framework for intercultural capacity building and support for students, staff and faculty. The College recognizes interculturalism, diversity and inclusion as core values in the effort to foster a globally aware climate and develop the competencies to successfully participate in the rapidly emerging culturally, ethnically and racially diverse environment that is the new norm. Diversity, inclusion, multiculturalism and intercultural skill are seamlessly integrated in our programming, thereby offering a common entry point for engaging these critically interrelated and mutually informing areas. Specific initiatives include employing the Intercultural Development Inventory as a learning tool to deepen intercultural learning.

Integrate English as a Second Language Support into the Curriculum.

Even though international students who attend the University have high levels of English proficiency, studying and interacting in class can still take some adjustment. Yet, many international students are reluctant to take supportive ESL classes because they are focused on completing degree requirements. Developing a campus-wide plan for how ESL coursework can fit into existing writing or other degree completion requirements would encourage students to take advantage of existing resources that will help them be more successful in their other classes and acknowledge the importance of doing so. Requiring incoming students with low writing sub-scores to take an ESL writing class before they take freshman writing could help them strengthen their writing skills, and provide them with a year of writing and grammar instruction. In addition, finding ways that ESL classes could meet writing intensive, liberal education, or other requirements would encourage students to seek out the language courses that support their learning and help them build confidence in their language abilities.

Curricular and Co-curricular Recommendations

Although the survey inquired mostly about academic challenges faced by new international students, a number of the recommendations below provide insight to anyone who works directly with international students in either an instructional or student services capacity. These recommendations can lead to learning experiences that benefit both international and domestic students without compromising academic standards because they embody Universal Design for Instruction, an inclusive approach to teaching and course planning designed to benefit a broad range of learners (Scott, McGuire, & Embry 2002).

This section of the report is not meant to be exhaustive. Instead, it aims to provide examples of how faculty and staff can engage with and support new international students. Although the recommendations discuss international students as though they are one homogeneous group, it is imperative to acknowledge the individuality of every student.

Recognize the Challenges of Adjusting to Learning in a Second Language.

Respondents in the survey identified challenges they experienced related to learning in a second language. Some of the students indicated challenges in adjusting to learning in a second language environment even though they had high levels of proficiency. Some small adjustments by instructors or staff might help students as they get used to learning in an English environment.

Faculty and staff might first examine whether their expectations for international students are realistic and make feasible adjustments to address the demands of learning in a second language. Minor modifications to instructional delivery may address the major challenges respondents identified:



How to infuse the recommendation:

- Lack of confidence speaking in class. Many instructors already design participation activities that give learners an opportunity to think first about their ideas, or to express them in writing or to a small group before speaking in front of the class. Not only can this promote more thoughtful responses from more students, it enables those with less confidence to clarify and refine their ideas. Since many survey respondents reported that less class participation was expected at their previous institutions, use of this approach assists new international students who, regardless of their English proficiency, may be building both their comfort and skills at speaking up in class during their first year on campus.
- Unfamiliar vocabulary, slang, idioms, and examples based solely in U.S. culture. Even international students with high English proficiency probably encounter a large amount of unfamiliar vocabulary in their University of Minnesota classrooms. Faculty can help by monitoring and, if necessary, expanding upon classroom use of examples and terminology likely to be unfamiliar to someone new to the U.S. For instance, referencing a character in the Wizard of Oz to illustrate a concept may well require further explanation for international students. Additionally, faculty can create a classroom climate in which students are encouraged to use electronic resources or ask for clarification of important terminology or examples.
- Dealing with large amounts of language. Instructors and staff can anticipate that it might take students whose second language is English more processing time to complete readings. For homework, providing students with guidance on the importance of study groups, and planning a personal schedule that takes into account extra time for reading can help students. If possible, providing extra time for all students on exams that require a lot of reading, but which are not testing the speed at which a student can process information, might allow students to better demonstrate what they have learned.

As international students are quickly immersed in living and learning in a second language, it is unrealistic to expect that their comprehension will be at the same level or take the same amount of time as their native speaking peers. The process of becoming orientated to the University may take longer as they need to first develop understanding of key terminology and vocabulary. Taking into account the differing needs of all students in a diverse classroom can help everyone succeed. For international students, investigating student difficulties and connecting them to both curricular and co-curricular resources can support their language transition and are especially critical at the beginning of their study. For example, students may benefit from language partners, tutors who can explain key terms, or formal English language development courses.

Even though students are often reluctant to take supportive English as a second language (ESL) courses, these courses can help address weaknesses that a student might have in certain skill areas. Students may better understand the role of strong academic language skills in their success if their college or program refers them to take supportive ESL coursework when needed. Students may also be more apt to seek out English help if their instructor recommends it and explains how to access the resource. Colleges or programs may want to develop a system to identify students who need additional academic English support during their first year on campus.

Beyond the classroom, there are also ways student services staff can assist students in their language acculturation. Approaches include providing culturally non-biased online resources and written materials. In individual interactions revisiting key messages, checking for understanding in individual interactions, interactively exposing international students to key University vocabulary, and providing silence (processing time) during interactions in which students can form their reactions and questions.



Be Explicit about Expectations to Address the Lack of Shared Academic and Classroom Culture.

Respondents cited challenges adjusting to a new educational system with sometimes unfamiliar and unstated expectations. Responses suggested a willingness on the part of international students to learn to navigate the University of Minnesota, but this could be facilitated by professors recognizing the need for time and assistance while adjusting to the new system.

Examples of how to infuse the recommendation:

To this end, instructors should imagine their course from the perspective of all students, including newcomers to this culture. Some ways that instructors could do this include the following:

- write explicit expectations in the syllabi and assignment guidelines that include not just what is expected, but also why it is important;
- attend specifically to areas that differ widely by culture, such as norms for classroom participation and instructor preferences for being addressed by first name;
- when possible, provide sample assignments and exams in case the format is unfamiliar to students educated outside the U.S.;
- solicit feedback from students in a variety of formats to better understand students' understanding of class expectations (as some students may feel more comfortable asking questions or voicing concerns anonymously in writing);
- ask students to come to office hours to discuss upcoming assignments, review feedback on assignments, and check in.

Further, instructors should not assume that students fully absorbed all information provided to them during orientation or the first week of the semester about assignments, participation, or campus resources. Instead, instructors could take a "just-in-time" approach where information is reinforced just prior to the time students need to know it. For example, they could point students to the Libraries' Peer Research Consultants at the time they are expected to begin a research paper. During the writing process, international students can be told about the non-native English speaker writing specialists.

For staff members who interact with international students outside of class, there are also strategies to help support them in their adjustment. Student services staff can explain their role in the University and help students understand how, when, and why to access academic and co-curricular services. Given differences in educational systems, international students may not even realize the resources available to them. For example, in some international institutions few student services exist, so students may rely heavily on assistance from peers. In their culture, they may perceive staff as a barrier to their success versus a critical component of it. Students may arrive to the University with faulty assumptions about the role of student services.

Build Community to Address Feelings of Isolation or Exclusion.

Respondents experienced feelings of isolation due, in part, to their own difficulty reaching out to U.S. peers. They also perceived, however, that they were sometimes overlooked during discussions, and excluded during group work because of negative perceptions of international students held by their peers, professors, and teaching assistants. In addition, interactive and participatory learning environments may be unfamiliar to many international students. Since we know that international students often feel disconnected from University communities, instructors can take a proactive approach to building classroom community.

Examples of how to infuse the recommendation:



To attend to the inclusion of international students, instructors might:

- attend to the participation of international students in discussions, and elicit their perspectives on course content;
- remember that international students are not the spokespersons of their entire culture, but they bring individual perspectives that can enhance discussions for all students;
- explore with students who seem isolated what barriers they face in their participation in the classroom community;
- facilitate group formation and set expectations and norms about group roles, particularly at the start of the semester;
- model and discuss expectations and norms of student roles in class and group work;
- consider the role of group work and class activities as opportunities for students to get to know each other and build community;
- facilitate formation of study groups to reinforce peer-to-peer learning outside of class.

It is equally important to address isolation and exclusion in co-curricular learning. As respondents to this survey suggested, staff can create structured opportunities that help students find common ground and encourage mutual adaptation. Successful strategies to do this might include creating peer mentor programs within a major, expanding programming within student residential life such as Students Crossing Borders, and actively incorporating international students into existing student service offerings knowing that they may not take the initiative to participate on their own.



Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The intentional focus of this research project was to better understand the international student experience at the University of Minnesota through the students' own voices. This approach, however, does raise considerations for interpreting the study data. While all international undergraduates were invited to take part in the survey, the research team acknowledges that the response rate was low, and may not be representative of the undergraduate international student population as a whole.

Additionally, there may have been some self-selection bias among respondents. Since this survey focused on the challenges that international students faced during their first semester at the University, those with negative experiences might have been more motivated to respond to the survey than students who had neutral or positive experiences. Future survey work in this area might include more questions regarding positive experiences in order to better understand what facilitated the transition to a new academic and social environment.

The survey used in this study was sent to international students at all stages of their academic career, and students were asked to reflect on their first-year experience. As a way to minimize possible skewed retrospection, future studies could survey students at the end of their first year on campus. In addition, students could be surveyed annually in order to capture any trends. By surveying first-year students regularly we may be able to evaluate University efforts to better the first-year international student experience.

This study is a one-time snapshot of student experiences. A longitudinal study that follows a cohort of students year to year could provide unique insight to how the needs and experiences of international students change over time as they adjust to their new academic environment and what factors affect student retention and success. This would build upon the existing literature (e.g., Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002; Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002, and Ramsay et al., 1999) that suggests that international students face bigger adjustment difficulties than their domestic counterparts. Perhaps such systematic surveys could be administered in connection with the University Office of Institutional Research.

This study only surveyed students. The transferability of the study findings could be further strengthened by surveying and interviewing faculty and staff members to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the issues suggested by students in this survey. Triangulating the data in this way could identify which themes and student perceptions resonate within the greater University community. Additional research might also introduce a sample of domestic first-year students as a comparison group to better understand the unique aspects of the international student experience at the University.

The survey, as designed, generated a large number of open-ended responses of more qualitative data. The themes that emerged were telling, but also raised more questions about the process of student adjustment. Thus, a final, but worthwhile, direction for future research would be taking a case-study approach to exploring the experiences of international students. Such research would provide a more complete understanding of the first-year experience of international students. Such data collection could include observations of and interviews with international students over the course of their first year in order to provide a more in-depth understanding of how different factors interact in the international student experience.



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