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Academic Concerns of International Students

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Abstract: Our purpose was to identify specific academic concerns among international students. Sixty-three international students completed the self-report survey. It was found that most academic concerns centered on faculty and advisers.

Keywords: international students, academics, faculty support

Universities in the United States are struggling to keep up with a changing economy and experts believe many institutions could fail in the coming years if they do not learn to adapt (Christensen & Horn, 2013). However, with potential revenue from increased international student enrollment and retention, many universities could improve their financial outlook without the need to raise tuition for domestic students (Owens, Srivastava, & Feerasta, 2011). If universities understand their international student population, more students can be enticed to attend, thus improving local economies (Owens et al., 2011).

However, there are many obstacles to retaining international students that must be investigated, such as academics, English language skills, and social inclusion (Burdett & Crossman, 2012; Grayson, 2008; Heisserer & Parette, 2002). While there are a diverse number of difficulties that may prevent a student from persisting, academic concerns are prevalent among international students with 74% of students stating they had difficulty with academics when compared to 65% for domestic students (Grayson, 2008). By understanding international students' academic concerns, universities can employ interventions and programs to alleviate issues for current and future students since more than half of students have said they intensely and frequently need information to solve their academic issues (Yi, 2007).

Problem

The United States leads the world in the number of international students who have chosen to study away from home (Witherell & Clayton, 2014). However, other nations such as the UK and Australia are gaining on the United States and have higher retention rates (Burkholder & Holland, 2014). These nations have clearly defined national policies to improve recruitment and retention of international students, which the United States lacks (Andrade, 2006). International students provide abundant benefits, which include financial stability, cultural awareness, and improved skills among domestic students (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013; Owens et al., 2011). International students accounted for nearly \$27 billion in revenue for American universities in 2013-2014, which helps to support local economies (Owens et al., 2011). However, adjusting to a new academic structure can prevent retention of students that do not fully integrate into the system (Mamiseishvili, 2012).

Purpose

In order to understand academic issues among international students, our team conducted this study at a public Western U.S. University. Previous research has found all students are affected by academic concerns, but international students are more concerned about academic issues than domestic students (Rodgers & Tennison, 2009). In addition, academic success is linked with persistence and retaining these students helps the financial health of universities

(Mamiseishvili, 2012). Therefore, we examined international students' academic concerns in order to highlight which issues were most important or pressing to students.

Research Questions

The following research hypotheses were formulated and evaluated for this study:

1. International students will report multiple concerns with academic issues.
2. Undergraduate students have more academic concerns than graduate students.
3. International students from non-Western cultures have more concerns with academics than students from other Western cultures.

Significance

Discussions of retention and graduate rates abound, with the United States graduation rate at 57.6% ("College Completion," n.d.). This can be greatly improved, as evidenced by data from Australia, where the completion rate is 68% (Department of Education, 2013). With increasing financial pressures on universities to improve concerns over budgets, improving graduation rates among international students is an obvious step to improving financial pressures as these students' tuition is often much greater than domestic students (Owens et al., 2011). However, there are academic concerns international students face that domestic students and faculty may take for granted that need to be explored further to help international students.

Literature Review

International students offer many benefits to institutions and domestic students alike. These include providing inexpensive teaching and research assistants, positive influences on domestic students, more open-mindedness among American students, and greater revenue from increased tuition (Alberts, 2007; Owens et al., 2011; Williams & Johnson, 2011). Yet, many international students struggle with academic endeavors even though many of them were exemplary students at home. Grayson (2008) found 74% of international students identified academic difficulties, a nine percent greater report than domestic students. This finding was supported by findings that indicate international students are more concerned about their academic performance (Mitchell, Greenwood, & Guglielmi, 2007). Two difficulties students previously identified were academic reading and formal writing, which surprised some students as they thought they were adequately prepared for study in the United States (Gebhard, 2012; Sawir, Marginson, Forbes-Mewett, Nyland, & Ramia, 2012; Zhang & Mi, 2010). In addition, since reading was a challenge and took international students longer to complete, students struggled to meet assignment deadlines (Zhang & Mi, 2010).

Reading and writing struggles are quite important, but another academic issue identified in the literature is that of class discussions. For instance, in the United States students are expected to engage in classroom discussions, which can be problematic for students from other nations (Romerhausen, 2013). In addition, some international students avoided asking questions as they do not want to sound unintelligent, while some students lacked discussion skills and struggled with long lectures (Andrade, 2006; Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010). Moreover, collaborative learning may help students to develop these necessary skills, but international students have struggled with finding people to collaborate with and have difficulties in collaborating with faculty (Valka, 2015). Therefore, some have suggested institutions should promote instructional strategies that incorporate collaborative activities as this has been especially helpful to students from Confucian cultures where collaboration is important (Lin & Scherz, 2014). Finally, international students have struggled to understand their degree requirements, which can be very frustrating for students (Ren & Hagedorn, 2012).

While international students have issues with some academic skills, one avenue that could help improve this is the relationship faculty have with these students. Trice and Yoo (2007) have suggested students spend more time with their advisors; they also found many professors lacked course adjustments to fit the needs of international students. By improving advisor visibility, international students can reap many benefits which include improved learning, personal development, and effort (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013). Advisors have an already busy and demanding schedule, but Heisserer and Parette (2002) contend advisors can help their students by being more knowledgeable of the services available to students, which may benefit both advisor and student. Students' ability to persist in their education is influenced greatly by their sense of belonging, which can be cultivated by advisors and professors to help international students as they study far from home (Heisserer & Parette, 2002).

Methods

A quantitative methodology was utilized in order to evaluate the research questions posed above. The study involved the use of a survey constructed by the researchers with inspiration from a survey previously administered at the University of California at Berkeley (Berkeley International Office, 2011). The data were analyzed descriptively and inferentially.

Survey

The instrument was given, via email, to international students at a public Western US university. The survey was chosen due to its low cost and decreased time for data collection (Leaver, 2000). Many previous studies have been qualitative in nature and a survey adds precision to the phenomena found in those studies (Krathwohl & Smith, 2005). The survey included eight questions that pertained to specific academic concerns international students may have had. The questions were evaluated on a standard 5-point Likert type scale with responses ranging from strongly disagree (=1) to strongly agree (=5). The survey was completed by 63 international students from around the world. Before sending the survey to potential participants, the survey was submitted to the International Student and Scholars (ISS) office and six international students who provided suggestions for the final version of the survey.

Procedures

International students were contacted by email through the ISS. The email explicated informed consent as well as procedures for completing the online survey. The correspondence also included information regarding Institutional Review Board approval and a hyperlink to access the survey instrument. In addition, the researchers' email addresses and phone numbers were provided in case participants needed clarification or had concerns.

Participants

The survey instrument was administered to 63 international students from 6 different colleges at the university. China and India made up the largest portion of respondents with 20.8% and 17.0%, respectively. In addition, 11.3% (N = 6) of students were from the Middle East and 53.8% were from an Asian nation, while 40 students identified as being from a non-white or non-western nation. Gender of the respondents was evenly split between male and female students, though nine elected not to identify their gender. Students had spent approximately 16.25 months at the university and 52.4% were graduate students (N = 33). An overwhelming majority of students were between the ages of 18 and 34 (90.7%, N = 49) while five respondents were 35 or older and nine elected not to share their age.

Data Analysis

Descriptive analyses were performed to provide an overall picture of the survey items as well as demographic characteristics such as mean age and months spent at the university. Once

descriptive analysis was complete, independent t-tests were run to identify differences between undergraduate and graduate students and between students from predominately white areas of the world with those from other areas. These t-tests were run in accordance with the research questions identified previously. Demographic and group comparison information was collected in order to account for differences between undergraduate and graduate students, students from predominately white (or Western) areas of the world, as well as gender, age, and time enrolled at the university.

Results

First, international students have identified numerous concerns about their academic endeavors in the U.S. These students found it difficult to participate in class discussions, to find others to collaborate with, and to understand degree requirements. In contrast, classroom lectures, textbooks, and tests in English were not as much of a concern. As expected, undergraduate students (N=19) indicated higher levels of concern. For example, undergraduates were lower than graduate students on *I find it difficult to participate in class discussions*, ($M = 3.32$, $SD = 1.53$), $t(50) = 3.34$, $p = .002$. *I find it difficult to receive help from my advisor* was also significant, $t(50) = 2.57$, $p = .013$, with undergraduate students scoring lower ($M = 2.89$, $SD = 1.79$). Similarly, *I find it difficult to receive adequate help from my professors* was significantly different for undergraduates ($M = 2.74$, $SD = 1.69$) and graduate students, $t(50) = 2.47$, $p = .017$. In every case, the undergraduate students were more concerned about aspects of academics than graduate students. Finally, there was only one area in which non-Western students ($M = 2.48$, $SD = 1.50$) indicated more concern than Western international students. This was: *I find it difficult to receive adequate help from my advisor*, $t(50) = 2.25$, $p = .029$.

Discussion

These results suggest international students may find it difficult to participate in class discussions, to find others to collaborate with, and to understand degree requirements. This clarifies specific issues that students face rather than stating that students are merely concerned with their academic success. In addition, undergraduate students struggle with these concerns more than graduate students, who have more experience in academic endeavors. While there was one significant difference between students from Non-western cultures, it was surprising that more issues were not significant. This may indicate programs can help students regardless of their place of origin. This is especially important as international students who can integrate into the academic system are more likely to remain enrolled and graduate (Mamiseishvili, 2012). International students often have more stress from delays, lack of resources, and feeling like social outcasts, so ensuring their academic success is important to help ease some of the stress they may have (Misra & Castillo, 2004). Finally, since 42 of 50 states face a budget shortfall in 2012, it is important to ensure as many students are completing their programs of study as possible (Owens et al., 2011). This can aid institutions in making their campuses more diverse, while also improving the local economy.

Implications

This study helps to clarify which specific issues are of concern to international students. Based on the findings of the study, universities should focus their efforts on undergraduate students. In addition, these efforts should aim to improve professor and advisor interactions with international students. Therefore, improved training for faculty may help to alleviate many academic concerns without placing more financial pressure on universities. If faculty make a more concerted effort to accommodate international students these students may benefit from greater learning and personal development (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013). By doing so,

universities can improve international student retention, thus improving budgetary concerns for the future. While international students and their obstacles have been studied for quite some time, the issues from the past are just as relevant today as they have been in the past and further studies in these areas will benefit students and universities alike (Tas, 2013).

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