



STUDENT VOICES

A Survey of International Undergraduate Students' First-Year Challenges

This study aims to better understand the challenges faced by first-year international students at the Twin Cities campus. Student voices emerged naturally from the survey responses to illustrate many aspects of the international student experience at the University of Minnesota. This report allows those voices to be heard.

While the survey questions focused only on challenges, it should be made clear that international students as a whole are motivated, talented, and successful, performing on par with U.S. students in retention, graduation, and GPA. By focusing on challenges, we seek opportunities to improve the experience for our international students and to help them be even more successful, not only for their sakes, but for the overall internationalization of the campus.

Data was collected in fall 2010. At that time, international undergraduate enrollment at the Twin Cities campus was 1,834 students, or 6% of the undergraduate population. International student enrollment has more than quadrupled from 424 students in since 2006. From 232 student responses, the following themes emerged:

FINDINGS

The main problem is speaking out in class. I seriously felt goosebumps even if [I exceeded the admission requirements for English I]. 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.

Theme 1: Challenges of studying and participating in a second language

- 40% indicated a lack of confidence using their English in class
- 35% cited heavy reading load
- 34% said too many examples used in class were drawn only from American culture
- 29% were unclear about expectations for group work

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.

Theme 2: Lack of shared academic/classroom culture

Many students expressed difficulty understanding the educational system in general, as well as the expectations of and communication with professors and staff.

- 40% said their previous school expected less in-class participation
- 48% said their previous school required less homework
- 41% said they were often unfamiliar with the types of assignments given here
- 41% prefer to ask questions that arise in class immediately afterwards rather than during class or office hours

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. 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.

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.

Theme 3: Feelings of isolation and exclusion

Some students 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.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Having a large number of international students at the University does not make the campus diverse... 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.

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 campus community. 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.

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 of people who are not Americanized, and in fact, who don't have to be Americanized.

Institutional recommendations

- Encourage mutual adaptation where learning is seen as a two-way exchange.
- Build collaborations among students, colleges, departments, and student services to enhance curricular/co-curricular learning of all students.
- Assess inclusion and engagement of international students in departments, programs, services, and opportunities.
- Create an expectation and establish rewards for faculty and staff participation in opportunities to build their cultural self-awareness.
- Integrate English as a second language support into the curriculum to help students be more successful in their classes and acknowledge the importance of doing so.

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

Curricular and co-curricular recommendations

- Recognize the challenges of adjusting to learning in a second language.
- Audit print and online materials aimed at first-year students for slang, idioms, and examples that might impede key learning for new international students.
- Imagine a course or programming from the perspective of a newcomer to this country to identify areas where expectations can be more explicit.
- Communicate to students directly about faculty, staff, and student roles, as well as about student support resources available on campus.
- Notice or assess the engagement of international students in courses and programs and work to improve it.

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.

Recommendations from survey respondents

Respondents provided feedback on how the transition into the University could be eased for international students:

- Create structured opportunities for integration.
- Be aware of the cultural background differences within the classroom setting.
- Encourage international students to use campus resources.

This study was a collaboration of International Student and Scholar Services, Minnesota English Language Program, and Center for Teaching and Learning. To read the full report, visit: global.umn.edu/icc/student-voices