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Culture Matters: Three Initiatives to Understand International Students' Academic Needs and Expectations

by Wendy C. Doucette

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Abstract: This paper describes three initiatives to target our library's outreach efforts through better understanding the challenges faced by our international students. We first convened a research advisory focus group of international graduate students to hear first-hand the type of specific support students were seeking in their programs. The majority of our graduate students are African, a group severely underrepresented in library literature regarding instruction and services. Letting students speak in their own words and tell their own stories reveals not only their preconceptions about academic success in the United States but their experiential ability to identify the gaps which present so high a risk to retention and graduation. We then broadened the participant base to include undergraduate international students to solicit qualitative responses with the goal of understanding how the cultural background, educational expectations, and research process differ domestically and abroad; challenges that our international learners face using academic libraries in the United States; and the problems posed by working on complex material in English. Finally, all international students were invited to participate in a pilot workshop on academic writing. The paper concludes by describing how strategies for serving international students through instruction and outreach have resulted in internationalizing our services for all students.

Keywords: international students, culture, coping strategies, academic libraries

While all students present different expectations and demands for academic libraries, international students present a special challenge for American institutions. We recognize that in addition to delivering academic resources and services, academic libraries are often *de facto* campus centers and safe spaces. By the sheer volume and diversity of students (traditional, non-traditional, undergraduate, graduate, residential, commuter, domestic and international) concentrated into one space, we become cultural microcosms. Those of us who interact with students, and in particular, teach them, often become sounding boards for international students eager to build a support network. Hearing students speak candidly of their confusion and knowledge gaps increases our desire to deliver targeted services to mitigate the discontinuity between what international students assumed American universities would be like and their empirical experience. Unfortunately, when faced with the need to deliver services which reflect increased cultural sensitivity, we may discover our own cultural competence to be lacking.

Literature Review

While it is heartening to observe that academic literature concerning international graduate students is “limited but growing” (Click, Wiley, & Houlihan, 2017, p. 345) because of the infinite number of human variables, it remains an exceedingly difficult corpus to quantify. In their detailed study of international graduate students, Zhou, Frey, and Bang (2011) list 10 sub-themes for analysis, each of which is a significant variable with infinite possibilities for overlap. Ren and Hagedorn (2012) provide an excellent overview of the many academic studies whose findings on international students in major categories are rife with contradictions on variables such as language proficiency, academic achievement, gender, age, classroom expectations, and culture shock. Likewise, Srivastava, Srivastava, Minerick, and Schulz (2010) determined that “preferences and concerns for international graduate student changes depended upon International Graduate Students subgroups like gender, age, nationality, and status” (p. 1572).

Renn, Brazelton, and Holmes (2014) make an excellent case for removing the silos separating academic researchers and communities of practice who share the goal of supporting international students but who operate without a larger contextual framework;

Isolated publications on single topics (e.g., academic integrity, distance learners, career development) in single countries provide a base on which to build, but are difficult to build together into a cohesive body of literature. Efforts to synthesize research across topics and/or regions would be valuable contributions” (p. 292).

Objectively, the following tenets may be accepted as givens: the number of international graduate students studying in the United States over the past decade continues to rise and universities which admit international students have formal administrative structures in place to process and support them, specifically admissions and international programs (Institute of International Education, 2016). Beyond these points, we enter the realm of subjectivity. What is the quality of the educational experience of these students? What could be done to improve acculturation and academic success, not only for the students’ short-term quality of life but for their long-term ability to attain high functionality in their programs? Whether or not students remain in the United States or in other English-speaking countries is one facet of the international education experience; their level of fluency across a range of interactive written and verbal scales is another faced and greatly impacts academic and other professional communication both during and after graduate school.

With regard to self-reporting, a study by Michalak, Rysavy, and Wessel (2017) suggests that students of all levels and nationalities routinely incorrectly self-assess their information literacy capabilities, erring on the side of overconfidence. When time is of the essence, international students may choose to translate back into their native language to understand a concept more fully, then re-translate the ideas back into English (Johnston, Partridge, & Hughes, 2014). Instructors of English as a Second Language (ESL) offer the same tactics to increase opportunities to improve international students’ communication skills: increase interactivity in subject areas. Bordonaro (2011, 2015) specifically recommends the use of open-ended questions and reflective thought and using the ACRL Framework. From a practical standpoint, Prucha, Stout, and Jurkowitz (2007) provide several helpful appendices for staggered information literacy instruction for international students which include an ESL matrix, introduction to libraries for ESL students, cultural survey, library vocabulary, SLA [Second-Language-Acquisition] theory and library application, and four sample ESL library exercises.

International Graduate Student Services

Although it would be fascinating to be able to assess the everyday degree of English-language immersion (Ranta & Meckelborg, 2013) of the international students at our university or to determine whether they function more in accordance with the values of their collectivist or individualist home countries (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004), these endeavors are far beyond our capacity and scope. We began our initiative with the basics of getting to know them.

Graduate students are the fastest-growing student group at East Tennessee State University (ETSU). Of these, the proportion of international students remains high. The library already offers graduate-level research support workshops which consistently attain high approval ratings from students. This free series is offered every semester to all graduate students and faculty. The series schedule for Fall 2018 contained eight offerings with workshops from previous semesters offered at other venues like a student-partnered thesis and dissertation support group and an all-campus brown bag series. In addition to addressing fundamental skills such as searching and citations, the workshops incorporate philosophies and methods to maintain work-life balance and to develop awareness of the skills and networking tactics needed for future employment. The casual, collaborative format encourages all participants to interact actively and to develop a more intimate, trust-based relationship with the instructors. Our experience indicates international graduate students make up roughly two-thirds of all workshop attendees and often bring friends with them. They frequently make follow-up appointments and positively recommend our services through word-of-mouth and student networks. Yet there is still much more to know to meet our own internal goals for student support and retention.

Outreach Initiatives

To better understand the challenges faced by our international students and target our outreach efforts, we began strategizing means to find out more about them. The Office of International Programs and Services is the primary contact for all administrative matters such as immigration, insurance, housing, finance, etc. Our objective was restricted solely to maximizing the scholastic success of international students through academic research support and informational literacy as well as promoting other services and collections available through the library.

This case study will summarize findings from three initiatives for international students: an international graduate student research advisory forum held in Spring 2017, a survey open to all international students in Summer 2017, and a pilot workshop on academic writing in late Summer 2017.

International Graduate Student Research Advisory Forum

After initial planning discussions in Fall 2016, we held an open call in Spring 2017 for student participation in a day-long international graduate student research advisory forum. The purpose of this meeting was to hear first-hand the type of specific support students were seeking in their programs. We engaged our six volunteer student participants in a discussion about roles, communication, planning, studying, reading, writing, and citing. While we achieved our objective of covering those topics considered directly relevant to our academic offerings, the most interesting and rewarding piece was the morning session where we simply listened to our students. Beginning from structured questions, they offered their stories of their previous academic experiences and expectations. They then spoke about their successes and disconnects within the American university system.

All students reported problems understanding spoken English and being understood by local speakers. Kuo (2011) details a similar problem experienced by students at an Alabama university who reported: "difficulties in understanding lectures were due to the speed at which the professors talked and their accents" (p. 40). This became a mutual point of conversation and commiseration when three out of four instructors hosting the international graduate student research advisory forum, two American and one German, revealed their own problems initially comprehending the local Tennessee accent and being understood in the South. Ultimately, they all found ways of adapting and being understood.

Although the more casual, reciprocal style of U.S. university professors required an adjustment, students viewed the change as positive and found American professors friendly and approachable. Despite this,

nearly all students remained hesitant to approach their faculty with repeated questions for fear of being thought ignorant or unprepared. Students who had been in their programs the longest had a greater comfort level with approaching faculty, possibly because they had reached the stage where ongoing interaction with their advisors and committees had become routine.

A fundamental step forward in resolving the uncertainty towards appropriate cultural response is observation and reflection on how to adapt one's behavior and expectations to those of the new environment. Students recounted examples of academic discomfort or confusion which resulted in transformative learning experiences. Their experiences are in sync with those reported in other academic literature[1]:

This [transformative] process is viewed as a conscious and intentional one that begins with a dilemma and moves forward as distorted assumptions and as meaning structures become transformed through critical reflection. The disorienting dilemma begins as a life event or an incident a person experiences as a crisis that cannot be resolved by applying previous problem-solving strategies. (Kumi-Yeboah, 2014, p. 113)

The most disturbing point—because it was echoed by all students—was rejection by their American peers during group assignments. Students reported it was assumed by their American peers that they would be a drag on the group. They were therefore routinely given the easiest part of the work and essentially dismissed. One early negative experience caused one student to give up entirely trying to be part of any formal group. We must wonder to what extent faculty are aware of this behavior and what steps, if any, are being taken to correct it.

Our student participants confirmed what much of the literature suggests: verbal communication is a surmountable problem, and the enduring problem is academic English. They reported the same problems summarized by Ravichandran, Kretovics, Kirby, and Ghosh (2017): “key challenges faced by international students with respect to writing in English concerned grammar and vocabulary, style guide use, organization and flow of information, critical thinking, understanding of plagiarism, and assignment completion time” (p. 773).

Of these challenges, the most serious but easiest to correct is understanding the rules concerning plagiarism in the United States and the devastating consequences of academic misconduct. All of our students confirmed that they had been informed about plagiarism during their first semester though not all were fully fluid in verbalizing its nuances. Gilmore, Strickland, Timmerman, Maher, and Feldon's (2010) findings that graduate students, international and domestic, may plagiarize more out of ignorance than out of deliberate scheming; the majority seem to improve by learning the rules concerning plagiarism the more they advance in their programs, which is encouraging (p. 22).

When approached with the idea in the closing session of the forum, our student panel enthusiastically endorsed the creation of a new hands-on library workshop on academic writing for international students. We were thrilled with the connections made through this endeavor and the information shared by the student panel. Because the panel was assembled specifically for graduate students, we wanted to cross-check with a larger group of students to see whether this baseline information was extensible to all international students regardless of level.

Survey of All International Students

In Summer 2017, we attempted to deepen our knowledge of students' cultural and scholastic challenges by also including undergraduate students in a survey on academic expectations for all international students. We suspected that there were commonalities shared by undergraduates and graduates and were interested in determining what those commonalities and differences might be. According to the ETSU Office of International Programs and Services, the majority of our graduate students (54%) are African, a group severely underrepresented in library literature regarding instruction and services. For undergraduates, Middle Eastern students comprise the largest cultural group (46%) (ETSU Office of International Programs and Services, personal communication, March 30, 2018). Our international graduate student research advisory participants, which included Middle Eastern and African students, were adamant about not grouping them together under the umbrella of “international students” without

further classification, so we were particularly interested in identifying preferences and recommendations from different cultures.

With the assistance of the Office of International Programs and Services, all international students were invited to participate in an anonymous, online survey. Questions were a mix of open-ended questions and multiple choice. Multiple answers were possible, and students were allowed to skip questions if they wished. The survey consisted of 14 questions in four categories: students, teachers, academic work, and demographics. Because this survey was intended to be accessible and non-intrusive, we did not ask about academic proficiency, grades, TOEFL score or native language. Given during summer, a time when students are less scrupulous about checking their email than during the school year, we were pleased to have 19 students respond. Of these, only three were undergraduates, so for practical purposes, this became a graduate survey.

Four students identified their home country as Ghana, three as Nigeria, two as Saudi Arabia, and one each as France, Pakistan, India, Iran, Norway, China, Liberia, Burkina Faso, and the Bahamas. For questions concerning students, average classroom size in the home country ranged from 20 to 100, similar to classroom size at ETSU with the median size being 30 students per class. Normal in-class activities, listed from most popular response to least, were listening to lectures, discussion, working in groups, in-class assignments, and taking notes.

Differences emerged with regard to behavior. Describing expectations of behavior in their home country, students responded almost unanimously with variations of attentive listening. Eight students clarified further by adding the words respect or respectful. The open-ended question about classroom differences experienced in the United States evoked a variety of responses, with seven emphasizing discussions rather than lecture, four mentions of greater resources and flexibility in accessing them including receiving and submitting assignments through electronic portals such as D2L, and three regarding the poor behavior of fellow students including rudeness, eating and drinking during lectures, spending time on their phone, and being disrespectful.

For questions concerning teachers, when describing the behavior of instructors in the home country, five students made positive comments with the remainder neutral or equivocal. The word respect remained present when describing the behavior of instructors in the home country both in a neutral way and with a potentially negative connotation when describing authority, strictness, formality, attitude, and control. With one exception, all students rated communicating with teachers in the United States as easy, and the most commonly-used adjectives were approachable and accessible.

Since so many students in the international graduate student research advisory forum had stressed the utility of listening to class audio recordings of class afterward through event-capture software, we asked two questions about technology: "If your ETSU teachers do NOT record their classes, would you like them to?" (14 yes, 5 no); "If your ETSU teachers DO record their classes, do you watch the recordings after class?" (13 yes, 6 no).

For questions concerning academics and completing assignments on time, students reported the need for more time when reading and writing. When asked about their experience writing papers, responses were overwhelmingly positive and mentioned how it was "hard but enriching," "great and rewarding," and "wonderful in terms of improving my writing skills." These comments are particularly gratifying given that these same positive respondents used the words hard, tough, or challenging eight times. Concerning confidence in one's ability to write a successful academic paper, 10 said they were confident, 2 said they were not confident, and 6 indicated they needed help with writing. Responding to the negative comments expressed by the international graduate student research advisory forum, we asked about experience working with groups. Eight responded positively to group work, four reported no experience, four reported mixed or neutral responses, and two responded negatively. Both negative responses came from African students who cited difficulties with verbal exchange. Overall, these student responses mirrored the information we had heard in the graduate student research advisory forum. The most likely area where the library could contribute was with academic writing.

Academic Writing Workshop for International Students

In late Summer 2017, we invited all international students to participate in a pilot two-hour, hands-on workshop of Academic Writing for International Students. Given in the library, seven graduate and two undergraduate students attended, three from Saudi Arabia, two from Nigeria, and one each from Liberia, China, India, and Iran. We began by stating that academic writing could be learned only through application and over time, so the workshop would provide an overview of the main practical aspects of academic writing including developing an idea through citation, avoiding plagiarism, and academic style. We do not teach ESL or writing and clearly stated that students experiencing serious problems with English may wish to pursue formal instruction elsewhere on campus.

As theoretical topics, plagiarism and different citation styles were covered first before switching to the hands-on mechanics of how to come up with an idea, structure an argument, bring together ideas from different sources, and do basic searching. As learning objectives, students were told they would leave with a working idea that could be developed into a paper, a personal EBSCO account, a search history in EBSCO, and a minimum of one article emailed to their campus account.

At the conclusion of the workshop, students were given an open-ended exit survey with multiple replies possible. Students found the most difficult aspect of the academic writing process to include finding a specific topic, developing original ideas, organizing ideas, literature reviews, writing in English, comprehending academic English, arguing skills, and reading many articles. When asked about the most useful thing they learned today, answers included how to get specific information in a systematic way, finding data in EBSCO, using an APA template, and how to find a model article. Three students indicated they would take a class on academic writing if it were offered, and six said maybe. The maybe vote is totally understandable considering that even a one-credit class is an additional burden both as a credit load and financially. All students expressed satisfaction with the workshop and indicated they better understood the process after the workshop.

Cultural Identity and Social Groups

Our international students reported a range of challenges directly related to communication and culture. While these findings are in line with those reported by other international students surveyed about their educational experience in the United States, namely that “academic challenges due to culture differences existed for all participants, regardless of their cultural backgrounds,” (Zhou et al., 2011, p. 83), these results should not be considered generalizable. We interacted with our students informally, did not select them in any systematic way, and encountered them in different settings with different interventions including live discussion and anonymous survey. Because of the leeway in self-reporting on closed and open-ended questions with no follow-up, it is difficult to draw conclusions about what motivated respondents to answer in the first place since no rewards or incentives were given. It is also possible to have received replies from students on both ends of the satisfaction spectrum with no response from the neutral middle or non-joiners.

The case is often made that international graduate students have little or no prior exposure to new terms and concepts, workload, and expectations of American graduate programs. They do not want to ask questions for fear of being viewed by peers or instructors as ignorant. They do not know how to navigate the new environment, committees, deadlines, rules, and the unstructured space of academic freedom at the graduate level. While acknowledging all of the above factors as valid, one vital point remains frequently overlooked: the universal, unexpected, staggering shock of graduate school for all new students, regardless of country of origin. With the exception of the degree of the cultural divide, all graduate students face these same obstacles: lack of familiarity with new terms, surprise at the depth of the subject being studied, pressure to perform at the required level, need to conform to the requirements of the program, and the significant impact of graduate school to the routine (job, family, self) of “life as normal.”

It is easy to assume that the solution to resolving culture shock is to increase greater interaction between American and international students. While we tend to think in terms of only these two groups when delineating the circles of international student interactions, Trice (2004) defines the same three groups as

determined by Zhou: “co-nationals, international students from other countries, and American students” (p. 677). Chapdelaine and Alexitch (2004) conclude that

international students who belong to large co-national groups in the host country may rely mostly on their co-nationals for social interactions, being less likely to learn culture-specific social skills. This would lead to higher degrees of difficulties in cross-cultural interactions. (p. 172)

In other words, students who have the luxury of remaining in their comfort zone with students from their own culture may choose to remain isolated from American culture rather than pursue interactions.

Freeman, Theobald, Crowe, and Wenderoth (2017) detail an interesting experiment where American undergraduate students were allowed to self-sort into groups who shared individual characteristics of ethnicity, gender, academic performance and found that “in a large-enrollment classroom that emphasizes intensive collaboration, students self-segregate to a small degree by academic characteristics and strongly by demographic traits” (p. 123). The study leaves open the question of whether homogeneous groups or heterogeneous groups are more beneficial to academic performance and found instances where either may be desirable. Again, the social and academic components for student success overlap, making variables difficult to isolate.

Social support is a critical component for success in any endeavor. Low attendance and reluctance to participate in campus offerings is something universities can struggle with when planning events for students of every type. All new students have to adjust socially, fit in with their program, and make new friends. Having relationships with classmates requires an investment of effort and time. To be sure, communicating with a base level of facility and fluency is a necessity for most social relationships, but if we attempt to attain Trice’s (2004) standard of “meaningful relationships with American students—they visited their homes frequently or talked with them about personal matters” (p. 673), how many American graduate students are not meeting the mark? The level of sufficient integration, like so many aspects of student satisfaction, is relative and personal. Ironically, since fitting into a peer social network is something all students experience, it is also a shared collective experience.

Internationalizing Services for All Students

As academic librarians, we already endeavor to support and retain graduate students through instruction and outreach. Our international students share the same motivation as our domestic students and desire to be successful. If anything, international students actively pursue our services more, attending workshops and booking research consultations in greater numbers than their domestic counterparts. We do not use alternate methods to reach international graduate students; the increased awareness of these students has caused us to internationalize our teaching. We are careful to contextualize our examples and consciously strive to avoid American idioms. We fully explain the consequences and components of staples like citations and plagiarism, knowing that even our domestic students may not understand the execution of these concepts as well as they would like to believe. We speak a little more slowly and clearly and provide students with written handouts whenever possible. All of these adjustments have made our teaching more accessible to everyone.

Within the university, we are keenly aware of our role as representatives of social capital. As Trice (2004) explains,

access to resources and opportunities available within an institutional setting are unequally distributed among institutional members. Access requires *social capital*, defined as relationships with individuals who are able and willing to provide, or negotiate the provision of, institutional resources and opportunities. These relationships are quite valuable because they can supply access to information about cultural norms, insight into how organizational units operate (e.g., chains of command, explicit and implicit rules), and knowledge of the U.S. labor market. They can also provide assistance in working with institutional gatekeepers, as well as valuable emotional and moral support (p. 672).

Despite the countless perspectives, attitudes, and beliefs experienced by our students, the universality of the graduate experience provides them with common ground. Greater awareness of the needs and feelings of our international students has increased our commitment to provide more than just academic

research support for our students. As a center of campus engagement, we position the library as Shared Space to foster a sense of belonging for all students. Here, all are welcome, and all are provided with support.

Conclusion

Delivering content and services that resonate requires understanding, not only of the subject matter but of the subject of the initiative: the students themselves. Letting students speak in their own words to tell their own stories reveals not only their preconceptions about academic success in the United States but their experiential ability to identify the gaps which present so high a risk to retention and graduation. It reveals our own preconceptions as well, highlighting in stark relief the efforts we have made (or neglected) to get to know this vulnerable student population first-hand.

As practitioners used to being regarded as experts, this can be a humbling effort.

Misconceptions, frustrations, and epiphanies occur on both sides, but this is how we improve as professionals: by remembering that interactions with our customer base are never a one-way street. As a former international student myself, I remember what it was like to live in a completely different environment, attempting to negotiate a school and system with little to no support or explanation. Applying this empathetic viewpoint to our international students requires us to refine how we approach services and instruction. When we approach all students with greater cultural sensitivity and understanding, we all benefit from the exchange.

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[1] For more on international students and transformative learning, see also Kumi-Yeboah, A., & James, W. (2014). Transformative learning experiences of international graduate students from Asian countries. *Journal of Transformative Education* 12(1), p. 25-53.