

Perceptions And Opinions Of International Graduate Students Enrolled In The College Of Agriculture Institute Of Food And Agricultural Sciences At The University of Florida

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Abstract

The College of Agriculture at the University of Florida surveyed current international and domestic graduate students to determine their satisfaction with services, programs, and environment. International graduate students were more dissatisfied with university-level student health services and the health insurance than domestic graduate students. International graduate students were also more dissatisfied with opportunities for student employment on campus. International and domestic students did not differ in their perception of assistance received from advisors in regard to qualifying exams and the dissertation process.

Introduction and Theoretical Framework

"We must not only learn to tolerate our differences, we must welcome them as the richness and diversity which can lead to true intelligence."

Albert Einstein

The education of international students at the graduate level is an important component of higher education in the United States. Approximately 200,000, or 10%, of the graduate student enrollment in American institutions is represented by international students (Digest of Educational Statistics, 1995). Wan, et al. (1992) note that international students are eagerly accepted at American institutions for many reasons. One is for the diversity they bring to the student body. Another is that they offset a declining pool of American students. Finally, they often have full funding for their educational experience.

Institutions of higher education have been providing special services for international students for many years. Akinniyi (1992) noted there are typically six

general categories of assistance or service available to international students through International Student Services (ISS) at institutes of higher learning. They are: academic advising, financial advising, personal advising, immigration advising, orientation programs and workshops desired to meet needs of international students. However, the use of the International Student Services varied and many times this service was under utilized by international students.

Johnson (1993) found that international students enrolled at the University of Southern Mississippi fell into three clusters each having a different perception and different level of usage of international student services on campus. Students (dissatisfied nonusers) who underutilized student services did so because they felt the International Student Services staff did not care about their problems. This group also preferred to keep their problems to themselves or ask advice from friends and relatives. The second cluster of international students used the ISS for academic or immigration concerns. This group tended to discuss their biggest concerns, financial matters, with friends and relatives. The third group indicated they were satisfied and familiar with ISS. Johnson found no relationship between usage of International Student Services (ISS) and the amount of time the student had been enrolled at the university.

Wan et al. (1992) exhibit concern with the ability of United States institutions to address the many cross-cultural problems international students face when they arrive on campus. Based upon a study of 412 graduate students enrolled in three universities the researchers recommended institutions focus on two interventions that reduce stress among international students. Those interventions are strengthening students' perceived English - language skills and their support networks.

Currently, reliable data do not exist that provide an accurate assessment of perceptions and opinions of international graduate students enrolled in the Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences at the University of Florida. To effectively meet the needs of and deliver quality graduate

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education programs to international students, data is needed regarding their perceptions and needs. The purposes of this study were to explore the perceptions of enrolled international graduate students regarding the programs, services and environment of the institution and to gather data on quality indicators of their graduate experience in the Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences. The specific objectives were to: compare the college services that impact the satisfaction of international and domestic graduate students; compare the satisfaction of international and domestic graduate students relative to the college environment; and to identify perceptions of international doctoral graduate students relative to assistance received on program of study.

Procedures

Population and Sample

The study population of the study was 705 College of Agriculture/School of Forest Resources graduate students registered Spring Semester 1996. The list was obtained from the University of Florida's registrar's office. To secure a 95% confidence level, 321 students were randomly selected to represent the population (American College Testing Program, 1995). A random sample of students, stratified proportionally by department and class (masters/prequalifying doctoral and doctoral) was generated.

Instrumentation

This study employed a descriptive research design using a mailed survey instrument developed by the American College Testing Program (1995). The Student Opinion Survey (4-year form) is designed to explore perceptions of enrolled students regarding the programs, services and environment of the institution. It is comprised of five sections: (I) Background Information; (II) College Services; (III) College Environment; (IV) Additional Questions Section, and (V) Comments and Suggestions.

The Student Opinion Survey is a standardized instrument with reported generalizability coefficients on the

following scales. Section II, Part B-Level of satisfaction with college services .99 and Section III, Level of satisfaction with college environment .98. (American College Testing Program, 1995).

The researchers included 5 additional questions in section four. These questions reflected those used in a University of Florida survey of exiting doctoral students related to level of assistance received in the following areas: preparing for the qualifying examination, selection of thesis/dissertation topic, writing the research proposal and writing the thesis/dissertation (Shih, 1995).

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected in February and March of 1996 following the Dillman (1978) procedure for mail questionnaire administration. A 74% (236 of 321) response was obtained after three mailings. Of those students who responded, 145 (61%) were domestic students and 91 (39%) were international students. The response of domestic and international students was representative of domestic (59%) and international (41%) student enrollment in the College of Agriculture, Spring semester 1996. From a university perspective, approximately 14%, or 1407, graduate students were classified as international students in 1995 (University of Florida, 1996a).

To determine if non-response bias was a threat, non-respondents were compared to respondents on selected survey items. A comparison of respondents and non-respondents indicated no differences between the groups.

Quantitative portions of the questionnaire were analyzed using SAS Proprietary Software Version 6.08 computer program. Descriptive statistics and independent t-tests were used to compare international and domestic student data.

Results

Given the 23 statements in the College Services section of the Student Opinion Survey international students differed significantly from domestic students on four items. There was no difference in 87% of the college services and programs between domestic and international (Table 1).

Table 1. A comparison of domestic and international graduate students' satisfaction with the college services, College of Agriculture, University of Florida, Spring 1996

COLLEGE SERVICE OR PROGRAM	Domestic Students			International Students			t value
	Mean	s.d.	n	Mean	s.d.	n	
Student health services	3.93	0.95	109	3.52	1.06	63	2.55**
Student health insurance program	3.18	1.21	56	2.73	1.12	60	2.06**
Student employment services	4.10	0.75	31	3.53	1.13	15	2.02**
Parking facilities and services	1.98	1.03	120	2.40	1.26	63	2.43**

Source: "ACT Student Opinion Survey, University of Florida," American College Testing, Iowa City, Iowa, April 19, 1996.

*5= Very Satisfied, 4 = Satisfied, 3 = Neutral, 2 = Dissatisfied, 1 = Very Dissatisfied. ** .05

International students were less satisfied with student health services than domestic students. Additionally, international students were less satisfied with the student health insurance program than domestic students.

Both international and domestic students were dissatisfied with campus parking facilities and services. However, international students were not as dissatisfied with parking facilities and services as domestic students. Additionally, international students were less satisfied with the health insurance program.

The college environment section of the student opinion survey was broken into six sub-sections as follows: academic, admissions, rules and regulations, facilities, registration and general.

There was no difference in 81% of the college

environment statements between domestic and international. Statistically significant differences were found between international and domestic students in four of the sub-sections: academic, rules and regulation, facilities, and general (Table 2).

Within the academic sub-section international students were more dissatisfied with the preparation they were receiving for their future occupation than domestic students. Additionally, international students were more satisfied with their personal safety/security on campus than domestic students.

International students were more likely to be satisfied than the domestic students when it related to quality of classroom and laboratory facilities

Table 2. A comparison of domestic and international graduate students' satisfaction with the college environment, College of Agriculture, University of Florida, Spring 1996.

ENVIRONMENT	Domestic Students			International Students			t value
	Mean	s.d.	n	Mean	s.d.	n	
ACADEMIC							
Preparation you are receiving for your future occupation	3.98 ^a	0.91	141	3.70	0.95	81	2.13**
Personal security/safety at this campus	3.38	.094	141	3.83	0.87	86	-3.60**
FACILITIES							
Classroom facilities	3.62	0.91	144	3.97	0.70	89	-3.29**
Laboratory facilities	3.62	1.0	135	3.92	0.76	84	-2.46**
GENERAL							
Opportunities for student employment	3.45	0.85	98	2.97	1.09	65	3.00**
Opportunities for personal involvement in campus activities	3.75	0.77	129	3.38	0.73	76	3.39**
Campus media	3.37	0.93	139	3.71	0.75	86	-2.96**

Source: "ACT Student Opinion Survey, University of Florida," American College Testing, Iowa City, Iowa, April 19, 1996.

^a5= Very Satisfied, 4 = Satisfied, 3 = Neutral, 2 = Dissatisfied, 1 = Very Dissatisfied.

**p .05

International students were more dissatisfied with opportunities for student employment than domestic students. Additionally, international students felt they had less opportunity for personal involvement in campus activities than domestic students, respectively. On a final note related to college environment, international students

were more satisfied with campus media than domestic students.

There was no significant difference between international and domestic doctoral students regarding their perception of level of assistance received from academic advisors on a variety of programmatic components (Table 3).

Table 3. Satisfaction of international and domestic Ph.D candidates with the level of assistance received from advisors, Spring 1996.

Level of assistance	Domestic Students			International Students		
	Mean ²	s.d.	n	Mean	s.d.	n
Preparing for qualifying examination	3.42	.96	31	3.69	1.09	26
Selecting of thesis/dissertation topic	3.84	1.13	31	3.73	1.08	26
Writing research proposal	3.81	1.17	31	3.69	1.01	26
Thesis/dissertation process	3.83	1.00	29	3.91	.95	23
Writing thesis/dissertation	3.82	.94	28	3.83	.86	18

²5= Very Satisfied, 4 = Satisfied, 3 = Neutral, 2 = Dissatisfied, 1 = Very Dissatisfied.

Conclusions

International graduate students were more dissatisfied with university-level student health services and the health insurance program than domestic graduate students. Currently, all graduate students enrolled in courses at the University of Florida are eligible to receive health care and counseling through the student health care center which is located on campus. However, these health-care services are not available to dependents of graduate students. This requires graduate students to purchase health insurance and assume responsibility for all medical expenses for their dependents.

Both domestic and international students were dissatisfied with campus parking facilities and services. This is primarily due to the size and scope of the campus, distribution of College of Agriculture facilities throughout the campus and limited availability of parking areas. While, the university does have an extensive public transportation service, many bus routes do not routinely run by College of Agriculture facilities.

Given several college environmental conditions, international graduate students were more dissatisfied than domestic students on the issue of being prepared for their future occupation, the opportunities for student employment on campus, and opportunities for personal involvement in campus activities. These concerns could be addressed at the university level through the international student services office. Like many institutions of higher learning, the

University of Florida provides a variety of services to international students. For example, foreign students have the opportunity to enroll in three English language programs to improve their proficiency in English.

The University of Florida also maintains an International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS) unit as part of the Office for International Studies and Programs. The role of the ISSS is to provide administrative and support services to international students and their families. The ISSS provides evaluations of international student financial statements, assists with the issue of visas, provides counseling on academic, financial and cultural issues; cross cultural workshops and orientation programs. Additionally, the ISSS is the official liaison with foreign and domestic embassies, consulates, foundations, and U.S. government agencies (University of Florida, 1996b). However, many international students are not aware of, or choose not to utilize, these services for variety of reasons, such as lack of trust and insecurity to share academic and financial problems. (Wan et al., 1992; Akinniyi, 1992, and Johnson, 1993). International students preferred to address academic-related concerns at the department level with their academic advisor and/or with fellow students (Akinniyi, 1992; Dillard and Chisolm, 1983).

Additionally, the two concerns of College of Agriculture international students related to opportunities for student employment (financial) and opportunities for personal involvement (social) in campus activities correlate

with previous research related to financial and social concerns of international students (Dillard and Chisolm, 1983; Akinniyi, 1992; Wan et al., 1992; and Johnson, 1993).

Finally, international and domestic doctoral students were asked a series of questions related to level of assistance received from advisors in regard to qualifying exams and the dissertation process. These questions were derived from a university-wide exit survey of all doctoral candidates (Shih, 1995). While Shih addressed perceptions of students graduating from a doctoral program, this study addressed the concerns of students during their doctoral program. There was no significant difference between international and domestic students on the following issues: preparing for qualifying examination, selection of thesis/dissertation topic, writing the research proposal, the thesis/dissertation process and writing the thesis/dissertation. The means of both international and domestic students responses to these statements ranged from 3.42 to 3.91, which corresponds to a rating between "satisfied" and "neutral" on the likert scale of measurement.

Recommendations

To meet the needs of international graduate students the authors suggest the following recommendations: (1) Develop workshops for graduate advisors to address specific international students in the areas of, occupational/academic advisement, multicultural issues, financial assistance, and health care services and care. (2) Provide departmental workshops or programs for all graduate students each semester to address academic and social needs. (3) Encourage international students to utilize the International Student Services Office.

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