

ASSESSING SATISFACTION WITH THE UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE: AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE.

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ABSTRACT

Despite the many positive contributions international students make to U.S. colleges and universities, their rapid influx has led to adjustment problems for both students and host campuses. Using measures of importance, expectation, and satisfaction, four distinct areas of the university experience including Campus Life, Academic Instruction, Student Guidance, and Instructional Support are analyzed. Collectively, results suggest that for many international students, the university experience is not meeting their expectations and they are not completely satisfied. These findings may be useful as preliminary indicators of areas in which U.S. institutions could become more multi-cultural in orientation.

INTRODUCTION

The history of students searching for opportunities outside their native land can be traced back to the Middle Ages. In the United States, the influx of international students did not reach significant numbers until the 1950s (Barber 1985). Currently, approximately 365,000 international students are enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities, representing more than 186 nationalities (Zikopoulos 1989). A large number of these international students are pursuing advanced degrees. In fact, 25% of the doctoral degrees awarded in 1989 were earned by international students (Mooney 1990).

The large international student enrollment provides a number of valuable resources to host institutions including a more realistic cross-cultural perspective in the classroom, greater opportunities for innovative teaching, increased funding through payment of out-of-state tuition, and students to fill excess capacity at many institutions (Dresch 1987, Lansdale 1984, Altbach 1989). The institution also has the opportunity to significantly influence these international students, many of whom will become leaders in their native countries (Locke &

Velasco 1987).

Despite these positive contributions from international students, their rapid influx has led to adjustment problems for both students and host campuses. Several studies have confirmed that many international students have significant problems adjusting to their new environment including language proficiency problems, lack of financial resources, integration and alienation problems and homesickness, among others (Adelegan and Parks 1985; Lee, Abd-Ella and Burke 1981; Pederson 1991, Wehrly 1988). Miller (1971) found that relationships with American students rarely go beyond the superficial level and, therefore, cross-cultural friendships do not develop. These problems result in social withdrawal, depression, loneliness, loss of self-esteem, and a decline in academic performance by international students (Marion 1986; Mohammadreza 1982; Wehrly 1988).

Alienation has been found to be particularly high among non-western students who, in turn, report disproportionately high levels of academic dissatisfaction and adaption problems. Research has also suggested that international students who interact more with U.S. students will be more satisfied with their university experience (Pederson 1991; Bulhuis 1986).

Because international students are often entering an environment entirely different from their homeland, the need for guidance and interactions with U.S. students and university personnel plays an important role in fostering a positive university experience (Leong and Sedlack, 1989; Ryland and King, 1992). These students often feel pressure to perform well in their academic programs and hope to advance quickly in their careers because of the knowledge they have gained abroad. These pressures result in the international students placing great importance on the academic components of their university experience and less emphasis on non-academic concerns (Lee 1981; Altbach 1989). Lee, Abd-Ella, and Burke (1981) found that international

students also regard academic advising as a very important service provided by a university.

Given the importance of the international student population to the host universities, it is essential that institutions strive to more fully understand the academic, service, and support requirements of this consumer market (Fashel 1984). While there is some evidence that faculty, administrators, and student personnel professionals are devoting more interest and attention to international students (Locke and Velasco 1987; Manese, Sedlacek and Leong 1988), others have charged that institutions in the U.S. have not been responsive to the needs of these students (Dunnett 1981). Some assert that in an era in which the "marketing concept" is readily applied in the business world, academic institutions are still using a "selling orientation" (Conant, Brown, and Mokwa 1985). Too often, it is argued, educational institutions place their needs first (e.g., recruitment, promotional programs) at the expense of student satisfaction after matriculation (Litten 1982).

If U.S. institutions respond too slowly to problems associated with international student alienation and dissatisfaction, other host countries such as France, Germany and Japan will continue to make inroads into the educational market (Zikopoulos 1991).

If U.S. institutions want to remain competitive in the 1990's and beyond, they must engage heavily in consumer research on international student needs and use their findings in the development of academic programs and support services that meet international student needs (Barry, Gilly and Schucany 1982; Abell 1977; Conant, Brown, and Mokwa 1985; Enis 1977; Litten 1980, 1981; Murphy 1979).

Leichty and Churchill (1979) suggested that assessing service satisfaction is an important area of consumer research, yet few have studied student satisfaction with their institutions of higher learning (Barry, Gilly and Schucany 1982; Hampton 1983; Hawes and Glisan 1983; Conant, Brown and Mokwa 1985; Ryland and King (1992).

The purpose of the current study was to more fully assess the level of satisfaction international students have with respect to various components of their academic experience in the United States. The current project adapted the satisfaction

assessment instruments developed by Conant, Brown, and Mokwa 1985, and Ryland and King (1992). The Conant et al study was one of the first to gather information on students' perceptions of the importance of university experience variables and to assess, using the disconfirmation paradigm, both their expectations and satisfaction levels with these factors at their chosen school. This study gathered data from only MBA students and did not distinguish international from U.S. students. The Ryland and King (1992) study analyzed data collected by the California State University system to assess the attitudes and needs of all students. Their analysis was confined to examining how international and U.S. students differ in their importance ratings for various university experience variables and differences in overall satisfaction based on a one-item measure of their experiences on campus.

The current study provided a more in-depth, multi-dimensional analysis of international students' perceptions of their university experiences in the United States. It assessed expectations, importance ratings, and satisfaction measures for 26 university experience variables. The present study also tested hypotheses relating to the importance of the various factors, the importance of social interaction with U.S. students, and differences between western and non-western international students' overall satisfaction levels. The results of this investigation could be used to adapt both academic and social support services to better meet the needs of international students and enhance the institution's position in the educational marketplace.

METHODOLOGY

Instrument Development

The survey instrument developed for the present study included 23 of the university experience variables used in the Student Needs and Priorities Survey (SNAPS) adopted by the California State University system to assess the attitudes and needs of students in general (also used by Ryland and King, 1992) and three additional experience variables used by Conant, Brown and Mokwa (1985). Together these items assessed four distinct areas of university life including

Campus Life, Academic Instruction, Student Guidance and Instructional Support. Factor analysis was used group the items into the categories. No loadings were below .50. The importance of each of the 26 items was assessed, along with student expectations and subsequent levels of satisfaction. The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients for the four areas along with the number of items in the area are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Area	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Campus Activities	9 items	.83
Academic Instruction	7 items	.73
Student Guidance	7 items	.82
Instructional Support	3 items	.57

On the questionnaire, respondents were asked to rate the importance of each item using a 7-point numerical scale with end points of 1=Not At All Important and 7=Very Important. Expectations for each item were assessed using a 7-point numerical scale with end points of 1=Very Negative Impact and 7=Very Positive Impact. Satisfaction was measured on a 7-point numerical scale with end points of 1=Very Dissatisfied and 7=Very Satisfied. A comparison of the expectation scores to the satisfaction scores produced a measure of disconfirmation, either positive or negative. Eighteen Likert-style questions were also included to evaluate the perceived quality of and level of satisfaction with the overall University Experience. These measures had been used in the previous studies mentioned above. Demographic and life-style information relating to the homeland, family, and other cultural factors was also gathered.

Hypotheses

Based on the literature review, the following hypotheses were developed:

H1: International students will rate those variables relating to Instruction the highest in importance, followed by Guidance variables, while Campus Life variables will be scored

lowest on importance.

H2: International students reporting higher levels of interaction with U. S. Students will exhibit higher levels of overall satisfaction with their university experience.

H3: Students from non-western countries will be overall less satisfied with their college experience than will students from western countries.

Sample Design

To test these hypotheses, names of all international students were obtained from the International Student Services Office at a mid-sized southwestern university. A cover letter explaining the nature of the study which was signed by the Director of the International Student Services Office and the questionnaire were sent to all 381 international students who were currently enrolled for courses. A self-addressed, postage paid envelope was enclosed. A total of 97 completed surveys were returned, yielding a response rate of 25.5 percent.

The following section presents a descriptive analysis of the university experience variables which contributed most dramatically to student satisfaction with their college experience. This descriptive overview is followed by a discussion of the hypotheses tests.

RESULTS

Descriptive Analysis

The sample of international students consisted of 59 males (61 percent) and 38 females (39 percent) from 30 countries. Of the 97 students surveyed, 61 had visited the United States prior to enrolling at the university. Sixty-five of the students were undergraduates and the remaining 32 were enrolled in graduate programs. Collectively, they reported an average of 4.69 years of work experience, although the mode was zero years, the median 4 years and the range was from zero to twenty years. Sixty-eight percent rated their ability to speak English as very good or good. Almost 94 percent indicated that earning a degree

in the U.S. would improve their chances of career advancement in their home country.

Funding for their education often came from multiple sources. The majority of these students (65%) were supported by their family while attending school, 21% were self-funded with 15 working part-time and the others working full-time. Another 22% were on scholarships or grants and 20 students funded their education through loans, employers or other sources.

The number one reason for choosing this particular university was because of the reputation of the school or of a particular program at the university. Financial aid, scholarships, assistantships and the tuition price were also important. Sixty-seven of the students had applied to multiple U.S. institutions prior to making their enrollment decision.

Table 2
University Experience Variables

<u>Importance</u>	<u>Expectations</u>	<u>Satisfaction</u>	<u>P-Value</u>
<u>Campus Life</u>			
Interactions with U.S. Students			
6.08	5.84	4.68	.000
Health Services			
6.00	5.50	4.42	.000
Financial Aid			
5.53	4.79	3.88	.005
Food Services			
5.50	5.03	4.06	.000
Student Union			
5.40	5.33	5.26	NS
Social/Cultural Activities			
5.31	5.22	4.84	.057
Housing			
5.28	5.18	4.33	.002
Recreation			
4.94	5.00	4.79	NS
Athletic Programs			
4.65	4.94	4.78	NS
Cronbach's Alpha = .83			
<u>Instruction</u>			
Instructional Quality			
6.71	6.04	5.29	.000
Course Content			
6.52	6.07	5.28	.000
Fairness of Grading			
6.33	5.96	5.68	NS

Table 2 (Continued)

<u>Importance</u>	<u>Expectations</u>	<u>Satisfaction</u>	<u>P-Value</u>
Intellectual Stimulation			
6.32	5.57	5.09	.006
Variety of Courses			
6.04	5.91	5.01	.000
Accessibility to Faculty			
5.90	5.39	5.38	NS
Class Size			
5.17	5.03	5.67	.001*
Cronbach's Alpha = .73			
<u>Guidance</u>			
International Student Office			
6.48	6.15	6.43	.014*
Class Schedule			
6.26	6.15	5.81	.02
College Catalog			
6.22	5.95	5.47	.002
Academic Advising			
6.22	5.93	4.97	.000
Career Guidance from Faculty			
6.16	5.69	4.80	.000
Pre-enrollment Advising			
6.10	5.71	4.65	.000
Career Guidance from Career Planning			
5.79	5.44	4.42	.003
Tutoring Services			
4.41	4.51	4.18	NS
Cronbach's Alpha = .82			
<u>Instructional Support</u>			
Library			
6.51	6.23	5.32	.000
Computer Facilities			
6.23	6.05	5.24	.000
Lab Facilities			
5.52	5.58	4.67	.000
Cronbach's Alpha = .57			

As stated above, the variables relating to international students' experiences at the university were divided into four areas. Table 2 presents the elements in each area ordered by their mean importance scores with the most important item appearing first. Results showed that for all variables examined in this study, none received a mean importance score below the mid-point of the 7-point scale. Table 2 also presents the mean scores for expectations, and satisfaction. A significance level for the paired comparisons between expectations and satisfaction levels is also provided.

A review of Table 2 indicates that for only two of the University Experience Variables (Class

size and International Student Office) did the students experience a positive disconfirmation of their expectations. For six additional variables (Student Union, Recreation, Athletic Programs, Fairness of Grading, Accessibility to Faculty, and Tutoring Services), student expectations were met with no significant difference between expectations scores and satisfaction scores. For the nineteen remaining items, paired t-tests of the means indicated that student expectations were significantly higher than satisfaction levels. This rather negative result is consistent with previous studies which reported foreign students were generally critical of their programs (Lansdale 1984).

Hypotheses Tests

Aggregate importance scores for each area were calculated, with the resulting group means: Academic Instruction (6.14), Instructional Support (6.09), Student Guidance (5.91), and Campus Life (5.34). Overall, these findings support Hypothesis 1 with the components of the Academic Instruction area scoring the highest on importance, with Student Guidance and Campus Life variables in the predicted order. No hypothesis was made for the Instructional Support facilities. This area had the lowest reliability score (.57) suggesting that these three support facilities (library, computer, and lab facilities) perhaps should have been assigned to other areas, probably Academic Instruction. When these three elements were included in the Academic Instruction area, the Cronbach's alpha score increased from .73 to .76.

To further test Hypothesis 1, a One-way analysis of variance was used to compare the mean values for each area. Results from Scheffe comparisons indicated significant differences at the .05 percent level of significance among all areas except Instructional Support which was not significantly different from Academic Instruction or Student Guidance. These findings again suggest that international students place high importance on instruction factors followed by Student Guidance and Campus Life factors. Additional support for the importance of the variables in the Academic Instruction and Student Guidance areas was obtained from open-ended responses given by students to explain any significant problems they

were having with any of these university experience variables. Of the 33 responses given, 12 were related to problems with Academic Instruction elements (e.g. fairness of grading, quality of instruction); 17 related to dissatisfaction with Student Guidance elements (e.g. poor academic advising, limited help with career advising) and only four related to Campus Life factors (e.g. interaction with U.S. students and discrimination issues).

Table 3
Comparison of Western to Non-Western
Mean Scores

<u>Importance</u>	<u>Non-Western</u>	<u>Western</u>	<u>p-value</u>
<u>Instructional Support</u>			
Lab Facilities	5.70	4.91	.045
<u>Expectations</u>			
<u>Instruction</u>			
Fairness of Grading	6.11	5.50	.030
<u>Campus Life</u>			
Health Services	5.68	4.90	.045
<u>Satisfaction</u>			
<u>Instruction</u>			
Variety of Courses	4.73	5.64	.016
Accessibility to Faculty	5.18	5.84	.040
<u>Guidance</u>			
Tutoring Services	3.83	5.17	.008
Int'l Student Office	6.31	6.82	.037
Guidance from Career Planning	4.08	5.43	.011
<u>Campus Life</u>			
Interaction with U.S. Students	4.42	5.35	.040
Health Services	4.16	5.05	.048
Recreation	4.53	5.32	.033
Athletic Programs	4.46	5.75	.007
<u>Instructional Support</u>			
Library Facilities	5.03	6.08	.009

To test Hypothesis 2, which suggested that international students who have more interaction with U.S. students would be more satisfied with their University Experience, a composite satisfaction score (SATISF1) was calculated using the six Likert-scored questions relating to satisfaction with the University Experience. The Cronbach's alpha reliability score for this measure was .94. To test the hypothesis, regression analysis was run with SATISF1 as the dependent variable and hours spent with U.S. students as the independent variable. The test showed no significant

relationship $F=1.53$, $p=.22$. These findings do not support Hypothesis 2. The data suggest that time spent with U.S. students does not significantly impact international student satisfaction with their University Experience. This could be due to the superficial nature of much of the interactions among students (e.g. sitting in class).

Hypothesis 3 which stated that non-western international students would be less satisfied with their overall university experience was also tested using regression analysis. Home country was recoded into western and non-western categories and then COUNTRY was used as an independent dummy variable in a regression model with SATISF1 as the dependent variable. The model was significant with an F value of 4.84, $p=.032$. The mean satisfaction score for non-western students was 10.4, compared to 12.4 for western (primarily European) students. This finding supports Hypothesis 3 which can probably be largely explained by the greater differences in culture for non-western students making their transition into the U.S. school environment more difficult.

In an attempt to further understand international students, the mean scores for importance, expectation, and satisfaction ratings were compared between western and non-western respondents for all University Experience Variables. Significant differences that were found are reported in Table 3.

Significant differences between western and non-western international students were found primarily on satisfaction measures, with the non-western students being less satisfied on all statistically significant variables. One possible explanation could be that non-western international students are not having their needs met as well as students from other countries.

DISCUSSION

Collectively, the data suggest that for many international students, their university experience is not meeting their expectations and they are not completely satisfied. This could be explained from two different perspectives. First, it could be suggested that international students have set their expectations too high and acceptable levels of university performance could not possibly meet

them. Literature on inter-cultural experience does support the notion that expectations play a significant role in the final evaluation of experience (Brislin 1981; Furnham and Bochner 1986). If international students become overly enthusiastic about studying in a U.S. academic program and place too much emphasis on the potential prestige associated with the degree, it is highly possible that a level of dissatisfaction will manifest itself (Ryland and King 1992).

Alternatively, levels of satisfaction below levels of expectation could be based upon inferior services provided by the institution. In this instance, administrators, faculty and staff at the institution can do much to improve the overall satisfaction of their international students. For the present study, it should be noted that the mean satisfaction scores were well above the mid-point of the scale, suggesting that students were not, on average, completely dissatisfied with their experiences.

With respect to the individual factors, the present study supported the hypotheses that Instruction factors would be perceived most important followed by Guidance and Campus Life factors. The data on Instruction components, however, do indicate that there is room for improvement. The literature cites a number of problem areas that international students face academically which include language proficiency, time pressure on exams, study skills and problems with use of examples in class with strong ethnocentric biases (Lansdale 1984; Ryan, Raffel, and Lovell 1987; Surdam and Collins 1984). Aside from making allowances for communication problems, institutions could place much greater emphasis on making courses more cross-cultural in content. As Lansdale (1984) suggests, the academic curriculum in many cases provides no "export utility" for international students. With no way to apply the course material to their native countries, it is not surprising that levels of satisfaction would be negatively impacted. Providing a more cross-cultural orientation would also benefit the U. S. students who must also be prepared to enter a more global marketplace.

The findings also indicated that the Guidance factors were important to international students. Guidance counselors and university personnel dealing with international students should be

trained to place themselves in the position of the student (Althen 1981). Additionally, faculty members should be attuned to the need for career and academic guidance by many international students. Poor advising or lack of advising has been shown to play a significant role in international student drop-outs or transfers (Palmer 1984).

Finally, faculty members should be more attuned to international students' needs for a wide variety of assistance requests. In many cases international students approach faculty members for both academic and personal advice (Leong and Sedlacek 1986). In the present study, it appeared that the International Student Services Office was doing an excellent job of meeting students' requests and needs since satisfaction levels exceeded expectations.

While campus life was considered to be less important to international students, importance scores were still high enough to indicate it is an area of concern. Alienation and discrimination are often reported by international students, especially among non-westerners (Schram and Lauver 1988; Surdam and Collins 1984; Ryan, Raffel and Lovell 1987; Leong and Sedlacek 1986). This finding was supported in the current study with non-western students reporting more cases of discrimination and an overall lower satisfaction level. Hypothesis 2, which suggested that greater interaction with U.S. students would lead to greater satisfaction among international students was not supported, but this may be due to their perceptions of such interactions as superficial. The lack of social support networks tends to add additional stress for international students (Pederson 1991) which highlights the need for the university to assume a guidance role for the students. The university could attempt to "force" cross-cultural interaction in group projects, talent shows, cultural exhibits, and other activities to foster cultural awareness and exchange. The findings that non-western students were significantly less satisfied than international students from western countries with several university experience variables suggests that integration into a foreign environment is more difficult for students whose cultural heritage is very different from that of the host country.

In conclusion, the findings from this study

may be useful as preliminary indicators of areas in which American institutions of higher learning should become more multi-cultural in orientation in order to better meet the needs of the growing international student population and to better prepare U.S. students for entry into the global market. Institutions need to more fully adopt the marketing concept and become more service oriented toward this important segment. The present study did have several limitations including measuring expectations about their University Experience variables in retrospect, a limited sample of international students from only one university, and no corresponding data from U.S. students by which comparisons between foreign and host-country students could be made. Future research could provide a more complete assessment of differences by incorporating these variables into the research design. Longitudinal analysis of international student satisfaction with their university experience would also help universities more effectively meet the needs of this important segment.

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