International students at Purdue are mostly content. They say life is generally easy. Their basic needs are nearly always met. But they are not experiencing rich cross-cultural friendships with American students. The key findings of our focus group series are summarized here:

- Social activities are an important part of college that international students learn about after they arrive at Purdue.
- International students rely on national student associations for information about campus resources.
- Students sometimes feel their American classmates judge them too quickly.
- Students also feel they have too few opportunities to engage in comfortable social settings.
- Language is the greatest barrier between students.
- Different cultural norms also create misunderstandings between US and international students.
- Cross-cultural relationships develop best in real work & living situations.
- Many international students feel they don’t get enough internship opportunities and career help at Purdue.
- Students with strict vegetarian diets don’t get much variety in the dining hall food services.
- International students are satisfied with most Purdue programs & services.
- International students usually won’t choose the extreme responses to survey questions.

In the following pages, the key findings are supported by more detail, including many direct quotations from students. Key observations are listed in **BOLD** text. Researchers’ elaboration and comments are set off by an arrow (➔). Direct quotes from students appear in *italics.*
INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS’ PERSONAL ACADEMIC GOALS EVOLVE AT PURDUE

→ Many say they came to Purdue expecting to earn a 4.0, but have since modified their goal.

“GPA is not your total life. You have to balance it with your engagement in life.”

“Before I came here I thought I would get 4.0. But after I came here I realized that would be difficult. But also I realized that you want to engage in the life of the university. It is not good to only study because friendships and relationships are also good.”

“One way I have changed is, before I came I thought a high GPA was all that was necessary. But now I know communication skill is maybe more important. The grades alone is not enough. For example, the Indian students usually have a better chance than [Chinese] because their English is better. We have similar GPAs with them, but they are native English speakers and that is a big advantage. So we are trying very hard to get good at communicating.”

→ They like it when their personal relationships overlap with their career goals.

“The people you know are all resources. Maybe later they can help you somehow. So it is good to have many friends and not just other Chinese. For example I have a relationship with the CCO international consultant. Also with ISS. These are things I can count on.”

“Diversity is really, really important. We want to be leaders of global companies. Unless we interact with people from various cultures we will probably not be successful as professionals. We need that experience, and we can get it here.”

International students understand that American students don’t all share their global perspective. They understand that for many American (especially Indiana) students, Purdue is the parochial choice. So they do not expect to share much with those Indiana students.

→ Asian students often feel more pressure to succeed than American students.

“In our countries the population is so large and the competition for jobs is very strong so we feel the pressure more than here. I don’t think we are too different from American students except we feel more pressure.”

“Some [American undergraduate students] want to get a job after college, and others are planning to go to graduate school, and even some of them are just here to have a good time. So they are very different.”
THE NATIONAL STUDENT ASSOCIATIONS FILL A GREAT NEED — AND DO A PRETTY GOOD JOB

→ Arrival and settling-in are critical times.

“If you come early the campus is deserted and none of the [institutional] help is available. And then suddenly during the first week so much is going on. Maybe we get the help we need, but it is hard to get everything done — especially if you have to ask every time, ‘Where is the place for this?’”

“I think the most helpful source for Chinese students is other Chinese students. They help us solve very big problems before we come. Sometimes the advisor [on campus] is not available to talk with us and the time difference is very big so before I came I was spending 3-4 hours a day in the summer trying to figure out housing contract and registering for classes. That was all very difficult. Every Chinese student has the same problems getting ready to come to Purdue, and when we talk to one who is already here they can answer our questions very well.”

“Sometimes I think we [PUCSSA] make it too easy for them. Instead of googling the question or trying to find the answer they just ask us, and I think maybe it makes them lazy.”

International students generally feel confident if they have contact with a fellow countryman. If they have that, they feel good about getting on the plane. This was expressed by both Chinese and Indian students. Europeans or others who have few compatriots here are more likely to engage with the campus resources.

They wish for more authoritative and dependable resources. Administrative staff and American students are, for the most part, willing to try to help. But often they don’t know answers to international students’ questions and sometimes the answers differ from one college to another.

Cultural differences can sometimes divide international students when they are using social media. A Jamaican student read many comments [on Facebook] from international students saying a certain apartment building was not good. But she didn’t know if the standards being applied by the commenters (from other cultures) were the same as hers.

Many nations have particular means of easing the transition to college in America. Many Koreans attend American high schools in preparation for college. Malaysian schools provide transitional courses that complement study in America. Indian students and most Europeans are already fluent or proficient in English.

→ Large international populations encourage non-inclusion.

“I remember I came with a very clear idea of, ‘I’m not just going to be hanging out with my own culture of Hispanics or Spanish speakers,’ but it just sort of happened because the first people you meet and the first people you rely on are those who are having a similar experience. So I made very few Indiana friends.”
“When I came I was with a group of 30 students from Beijing. We traveled together and some of us found an apartment.”

“Before I came here I was planning to join a foreign [non-Chinese] student association, like PSG or something. But when I came I found there were so many Chinese students. The people around me are all from China, and that is good because if you live and study with people you are familiar with it will be more helpful. With other students there is culture barrier and language barrier.”

“I think international students – not only like Chinese-and-Chinese but also Chinese-and-Indian – it is easier for them to be friends than to be friends with an American because they have in common that they are both not from America. They can share their experiences coming to America. They have more common things so it’s easier to be friends.”

“I have seen Chinese and Indian students most of the time discussing how international students don’t have much opportunity for internships or something – they don’t have much opportunity here. I have seen them discussing things like that and later maybe one of them will find something and they help each other and they get friends that way.”

**WE NEED MORE TIME: PATIENT PEOPLE & MULTIPLE OPPORTUNITIES**

→ Friendships are often assessed over the long term by Chinese students, so they don’t value casual acquaintance much.

“*I think maybe, 10 years, 20 years after, I will think back and know if I made friends at Purdue.*”

“*I try my best to make friends in every situation, in the lab, in class, in other places, I try to see if, you know, this person is the kind you want to know for the future, for your whole life, or just a short time.*”

“*We need to identify the American people who will be patient with us. Because usually we are eager to share our culture with other people, but . . . if our English is not good . . . you just tend to move in the direction of being with Chinese more.*”

“*I think we need to find the people who are interested in cross-cultural activities – who are looking to spend time with us and be a little bit patient until we learn to do everything.*”

→ One invitation to get involved may not be enough. Students have many demands on their time, and if a student declines an invitation once it may only be that he needs to study or is tired.

“*It is not possible to always keep a balance. Sometime I need to study and I don’t be with my friends. Other times maybe I leave studying too much so I can be with friends. It is very difficult.*”
“We need not only our Chinese friends but also lots of Koreans, Americans, Russians, and lots of other people. Most of us agree because we decided to come here and experience it. But also, some of my Chinese friends will say no. Sometimes my American friend will tell me to bring some more Chinese friends to a party or a gathering, but when I ask my Chinese friends to go they say, ‘No.’”

Cultural exchange [performances based on national culture and history] is often cited as a means of building bridges. It is the one thing that students from any culture can do with pride and confidence.

“Let there be a festival where everybody can perform together. There ought to be a festival where literally ALL the cultural groups present in one show. As it is there are flyers and pamphlets for events now and again but people don’t see them and at the end of the year a year has gone by and many students have missed their chance to make a connection.”

COLLABORATION IN REAL WORK & LIFE ENHANCES RELATIONSHIPS

“When we work with the Americans, like at the dining court, usually it is fine because they use the work language. It is simple and easy to communicate. But when you hang with them it is a big problem because they use slang, or they speak quickly, or they talk about their own culture.”

“Working is fine and you can take orders or issue orders, but you can’t really . . . get along with them very well.”

“I think one way to solve this is to have more work we can do together. For example the training for TAs was a time when many students volunteer and they are willing to be patient. They were eager to share experiences and that opened up everyone and we enjoyed the conversation.”

“Most of my American friends are people I met from my project teams. But after the project is done we never talked again. I think it is because every person in this place – the university – has a personal goal and they want to achieve that goal, right? And that’s what makes them indifferent to each other.”

“If there is a group project you have to do, we talk during that but only about the project. We don’t talk to each other as a friend. After the project, we . . . don’t talk anymore.”

“I want to talk with American students and get to know them. But if they ask, ‘Do you want to go to a bar,’ I will say ‘No.’ Maybe I’d like to go to a movie or to dinner, but going to bars is not what I think women should do.”

“The dorms were extremely important. I’m still friends with my friends from the dorm. You live together, you eat together, so I felt myself much less lonely. If I think of myself living in an apartment alone or with one roommate and walking alone to class I think my experience would have been a lot less in terms of making friends. I think the dorms really provide the environment for freshmen where they can meet a lot of people.”
SOCIAL NORMS CREATE MISUNDERSTANDINGS

“I have three people I would consider . . . buddies. And it is more than you would normally get from an American, but still . . . there is a kind of a wall past which you cannot continue.”

“Yeah, there comes a point where you can spend some time together but there’s nothing more.”

“In some sense it is our problem. Our English is not perfect enough. But also in some sense it is the Americans aren’t friendly enough.”

“I’ve never found hostility. I mean, I feel I’m welcome here. But I just feel they have no interest. To say I have a genuine American friend? No.”

“I notice a huge difference among American people between those who have traveled abroad and those who have not, in terms of how open they are to friendship with international students. So the people I can count as, ‘Yeah they are my friends,’ they are more open to it. Otherwise, what I have observed . . . I mean there are people here who have never even been outside of Indiana, right? And in those cases there’s just no curiosity.”

Exceptions do occur. An Indiana sophomore joined the Purdue Indian Dance Club and has become involved though most of the club’s activities are conducted in Hindi. He is the “outsider” among club members, yet he participates enthusiastically and gives a lot of help to club members.

“It is hard to get into any social group unless someone already inside the group brings you into it. Personally, I have not made an American friend myself. I have met Americans because I went somewhere with a person and they introduced me to someone new.”

“I remember my first roommate – my roommate was an American girl – super-nice and we got along well, but I could never become true friends with her. So I switched after the first semester and I lived with a girl from India.”

“I know a lot of people here. If I would talk about acquaintances I would say more than 100, but of close friends I would say one or two and they are only Chinese. It is really hard to be close to Americans because of the differences in culture and experiences. They are really different.”

“In India, when you encounter a person, you typically do not smile or even acknowledge the person. So when Indian people get the friendly treatment . . . to be honest, it happens a lot with guys . . . they see that very friendly treatment from Americans and they interpret it to mean more. That happens quite often.”

“We might frown at you when we first meet. But later I will probably invite you over to my place and make dinner for you. With the Americans, they smile and say, ‘Hi,’ but that is all.”
“We expect people to press us to attend when they invite us to an event or party. Here, it’s like, ‘There’s a party. You can come if you want to.’ Here we’re not sure if we’re really invited. We’re not sure whether or not the inviter really cares! At home it is much more clear.”

→ Students are constrained by what they imagine others are thinking.

“Sometimes I feel like, I am the international student; I have the language barrier. I think most of us feel like, ‘Oh, so you’re not perfect at English’ so you don’t have the courage to talk to people. And, at the same time, the Americans feel like, ‘Oh, you look Asian so I don’t suppose you speak perfect English so I wouldn’t talk to you.’ That is what creates the barrier.”

“I think if I was a boy it would be easier because they can talk about basketball and it’s easy: they can talk. They can just hang out to play basketball together and they may become friends. But girls don’t have the topics to talk about. Maybe some girls like gossip: they like to talk about movie stars but I don’t know too much about the stars. You cannot really tell your true feelings to a foreigner.”

“The feeling I get is, they want to make it seem as though they’re friendly but they’re really not. They ask how you’re doing but they don’t really want to know. It’s just a meaningless greeting. If someone from where I’m from asks the question they genuinely want to know how you’re doing.”

“I don’t know if Americans try, but you tend to feel, no matter how much you try to fit in there comes a point that, ‘Hey, you are not from here: You are different.’”

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS ARE MOSTLY SATISFIED WITH PROGRAMS & SERVICES

→ Quality of service is inconsistent; is best when caring individuals take initiative.

One student mentioned a graduate program coordinator who sent out a weekly message for international students with timely and useful information. The coordinator took initiative to select messages that were especially important, such as deadlines and opportunities. When that person was promoted to a new position, her replacement didn’t continue the practice. International students receive the same emails as US students and sometimes their special concerns slip by.

“I made a great friend when I came here. His name is Jay. He’s in our department – Agricultural Economics. Our advisor assigns two American students to help two international students get around. So basically he’s my supervisor [mentor would be more accurate]. And friend. He told me a lot of things when I just came here and didn’t know anywhere. He took me to the CoRec and he took me to the aquatic center and took me to the football game. And he even bought the tickets. I think he is really great.”
“I benefitted a lot from my year as a freshman in McCutcheon. My roommate was an American. But also, in McCutcheon we have a lot of floor activities. Our RA was a really outstanding, outgoing person and she organized something every week and she shared so much with us. When I first came here and I’d see an American student I thought, ‘How can I talk with [her]? What do we have in common and what can we talk about?’ But our floor activities were easy things like watching a movie or eating ice cream and I learned that it wasn’t so hard.”

A BGRi leader followed up after the program, sending emails to participants to make them aware of activities and opportunities. Even six months later the group leader and the student met on campus and the BGRi leader remembered her name, which made the international student happy.

Students say they get the most orientation information from their own national friends rather than the formal programs. The help from their colleges is mixed – sometimes very good and other times absent. The Math Department was highly praised. Sometimes students call their college, find no help, and then feel abandoned.

There were favorable comments about BGRi, but additional help is needed before and after that hurried week.

The off-campus International Center has a good reputation. Students wonder why Purdue isn’t directly involved with it. They feel Purdue’s non-affiliation “sends a message.”

Clubs and student organizations are a mixed bag, and many of them leave students disappointed. Sometimes students feel more accepted in activities sponsored by their college than in student-led activities.

“I went to some of the clubs and then I didn’t go back. Maybe it is because they were kind of boring, you know, just sing a song together or something like that. I thought I would be able to learn something by joining the club, but all they wanted to do was go shopping.”

“I think [college-sponsored activities] don’t look at me as an international student but just as a student in Krannert – as another common member of the group who shares the same purpose. And that makes me feel really good because I know I am accepted.”

Purdue doesn’t promote programs effectively. Students don’t know what is available.

“In Chinese culture, if we have some kind of personal issue, we usually just suffer it alone. I’m talking about needing psychological help or anything like that. Here they have something to help – I mean like CAPS. But many of the Chinese students don’t know about it, or they don’t know it can help them and they should go to see. So I think there needs to be more advertisement of the help that is available.”

“Mostly we don’t talk about problems with our family. A lot of us have Skype to talk with our parents, but we don’t talk about our problems because that would make them more worried. So we just look for someone here who maybe can help us.”
There are many favorable comments about campus services as well as negative ones.

Students have been impressed by beyond-the-call-of-duty acts of kindness: a bus driver saw a student standing at the wrong place, too late to get a ride, and stopped and took him to the right place even though his bus was off duty.

“I don’t know if anyone else has this experience, but I came about two weeks before classes were going to start and I had the bus schedule. But I found I was standing at a place where the bus would not be coming for another two weeks! And somebody was nice enough to help me and tell me what I should do and how to get where I wanted to go. But it would have been better if I had the correct information to begin with.”

One student arrived early and Hawkins Hall allowed him to settle in earlier. He was surprised and pleased, noting that the officials in his country would never bend the rules in that way.

PUSH does not meet the standards of health care they are used to.

“I think [PUSH personnel] are courteous and as far as I know they are competent. But I do not understand why they will not give appointment on the day you call. If I have a bad headache then I need to see someone then, but they only offer an appointment one or two days later. That won’t help me at all. So I just try to take something myself and forget about it.”

International students expect to receive attention from the doctor. But at PUSH the nurses collect much of the information. It makes the students wonder if they are getting proper care and if the nurses are acting appropriately.

Administrative services are sometimes perceived as rude or inefficient.

“In [India] people do not say ‘No.’ It is quite rude. You have to say, ‘This is difficult’ or something like that. So coming here and hearing people say ‘No’ is something I was not very much used to. It would be better if they would say, ‘It can’t happen today,’ and tell me the reason, or if they would explain how I can make it possible: if they would show they are trying to help rather than just say, ‘No!’”

The difference between good service and excellent service is courtesy and warmth. Many students expressed the view that the service is “good” if the task gets accomplished, but “excellent” when the person understands and expresses concern. Students want a human connection.

“If I ask how to get to Schleman Hall someone might just point the direction. Or someone might tell me which bus to take, and where I can get that bus, and how long it will take. Or they might walk with me. I feel better if they do that.”

“I did have an incident at the Bursar’s Office where . . . I didn’t quite like how I was spoken to. I got a notice there was a hold on my account and I went in to the office to find out what was the reason, because as far as I was concerned I had paid everything. I went and I asked the lady and we were discussing it, and then a supervisor came and was talking to the lady, and I’m totally
out of the conversation now, but she is making reference to me as if I am not there, so I said, ‘I am not understanding what you are saying!’ and the supervisor looked at me and said, ‘I am not talking to you!’ Well, I understand the lady was trying to get information to help me. But I don’t think it was right to say, ‘I am not talking to you.’"

Students dislike having to make multiple trips to get one thing done. Also they resent being asked many, many times for the same personal information, when they know the answer is already populated into the university’s databases.

“It took quite a while to find someone in ISS who would deal with me, and even now that person is a little bit slow in giving me an answer.”

“I ended up waiting for two hours in one office. There was a red line and a blue line, and the blue line was moving a lot faster. To be honest, I think it was just the person in the blue line knew what they were doing and the person on the red line, I’m not sure if they were learning or if that’s just the way they work. But I waited two hours and then finally they said I could not do anything that day, I would have to come back.”

“I had a bad experience recently. I was forced to leave the [Ford] dining court because an administrator thought I was another person. That person was not allowed to be in the dining court. I don’t know why. It was lunch time and I swiped my meal plan and when I was waiting in the line, she said, ‘You can’t be in this dining hall. You have to leave.’ I asked her why and she didn’t answer: she just said, ‘You have to leave.’ Later – two days later – I got an apology in an email.” (He explains that a fellow student took responsibility to arbitrate the issue.)

“We came to Purdue because the program we are in is ranked very high or because we met someone who told us good things about it. If there is something wrong with the ways the administration works, so be it. I’m not here to enjoy the [administrative bureaucracy] – I’m here to do engineering, right? As long as the education is as good as we expect and there is no hostility towards us, it’s good. And anyway, we can’t expect that some other university administration is better. I’ve heard very bad things about UC-Berkeley.”

→Dissatisfaction with amenities

“The offices they give to grad students do not have windows. And, you would never see something like that in the Czech Republic because . . . it is really terrible. I am wondering, ‘Why did they do this?’ In my country, the architecture is always taking natural light into the plan . . . even the bathrooms have natural light. So the offices here just seem very bad.”

“The building gets older every year, but the fee gets higher.”

“I found out here when they say a coffee break they literally mean just coffee. In my culture if they have a ‘coffee break’ there will be finger sandwiches and chiches and all kinds of things. If they say ‘food’ then it will be a full meal. When I went to my orientation they said ‘Food will be provided’ and when I got there I saw, you know, Subway sandwiches. So now if they say there will be food I eat at home beforehand.”
West Lafayette and Lafayette get no plaudits.

Students feel safe and engaged at Purdue, but many have nothing good to say about the community outside the campus. Students who feel perfectly safe on campus say they would not venture across the river. Purdue provides plenty of activities, but without Purdue the community would be “quite boring.”

**INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS VIEW SURVEYS DIFFERENTLY**

International students are less likely than Americans to project overall thoughts (e.g., campus pride) onto specific questions in a survey.

“If the thing is OK and it meets my expectation, I’m satisfied. To be ‘Very Satisfied’ would be . . . strange.”

“For me to put a 1 or a 5, it really needs to be a big issue. I feel like here in the US people are using stronger language, like ‘Oh, this is so wonderful.’ But for me, I’m not so willing to say it. And the same in the negative direction. Something has to be really terrible for me to give it a 1.”

“Americans use a lot of hyperbole: ‘It’s super, it’s wonderful!’ That is not language we use where I come from.”

“I have the experience of doing a survey and I put a 3, and then they called me and said, ‘Oh, what can we do better?’ And I said ‘There is nothing you could do. I went in and I did my transaction and it was OK.’ That’s all.”

“Unless the service was really, really good . . . or really, really bad, I’m satisfied. It doesn’t necessarily mean everything is good. I understand conditions are not perfect.”

The word “Satisfied” has a heavy connotation in some cultures.

The questioner who asks if someone is satisfied might be implying that they are tired of dealing with the person. Questions about satisfaction might also imply a particular relationship, which could surprise students who do not feel that relationship exists. Probably the word does not carry the same implications in a survey as when it is exchanged between individuals, but still the connotation of the word may affect how some Asian students answer survey questions.

“Satisfied is kind of a strong, emotional word, in our language. We normally cannot ask a person are they satisfied – instead we ask do they agree or disagree or something.”

Like all students, the international students feel there are too many student surveys at Purdue and the surveys don’t achieve much.
“When I first came and I got a survey I said, ‘OK, let me do this.’ But after a while there were more and more of them and eventually . . . you just ignore it.”

“I remember answering questions on a survey and thinking, ‘I have already answered this question somewhere else.’ So I wonder if the University coordinates them well enough.”

“When I take the survey, I’m not sure how serious the people take my advice or opinion.”

“It can be very frustrating to get a survey about something important, and then we see the survey is not asking the right questions, or it’s asking the question badly.”

“When we are asked our opinion back in India usually it is because the university is going to choose between two possible options. They will hear the students’ opinions then make a decision. But the surveys at Purdue are just asking many questions without a purpose.”

They don’t believe surveys are anonymous.

This is not based on their experiences at home, but from astute observation: if the invitation to take the survey was sent to their email, they KNOW the sender knows who they are. One student gave an example of a Purdue Village questionnaire that promised anonymity but required them to put their name.

A FEW PARTICULAR AND SPECIFIC COMPLAINTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Several students wish to have more time for advisor sessions.

Chinese students say thirty minutes is not enough. They have more questions and require a more thorough explanation to their questions.

“I don’t understand why academic advisors take so long to meet with us. I called him at September but he just met with me in November. I don’t understand the reason for the two-month delay.”

“Sometime you meet with your advisor and they just tell you what courses you can take. But we can see that in the course catalog. What I care about and what I want the advisor to help is making my long-term goals. Maybe I can find an internship or something that will help but I need for the advisor to tell me about it.”

Special international student fees are a sore spot.

“I understand fees have to go up, but when you are not a part of the process you feel like an outcast. They should consider the psychology of the situation. They should at least give us a chance to hear what the reasons are so we don’t feel like outcast.”
“We did not know until they announced plan to raise the international fee. And I understand they think international students are rich, which is not always true. Some international students feel very strong [against] this policy, and [we have no way to] express that.”

Vegetarian students (mostly Hindus) complain that the required meal plan provides nothing they can enjoy yet requires them to pay.

The Indian students’ special grievance is the requirement that they buy a meal plan even though there’s nothing at the food courts that they consider worth eating. They want something with sauces and flavors. Also they consider salads defiled by eggs or other ingredients.

“Boiled vegetables is not a food.”

“If we don’t have the meal plan, then at least we can go out and find something off campus.”

“The dorms’ food is very limited for vegetarians, and it has been imposed that you have to have a meal plan. For vegetarians it is not worth it.”

“I’ll give you my example, I came last semester and in one semester I lost 15 kg. There’s no variety and the quantities are limited. Vegetarian food doesn’t just mean vegetables. People argue that Windsor has vegetarian food. But what they fail to understand is that boiled vegetables is not vegetarian.”

“Boiled veggies were for sick people back home. I search the menu each week for items that will be more enjoyable for me. I’m moving off campus next year because of this. I don’t want to starve. I like living in the dorm, but the required meal plan doesn’t serve me well.”

The opportunity for internships for international students is limited.

CPT (Curricular Practical Training, which enables a students to take an internship that is pertinent to his or her field of study while enrolled in college) offers a legal avenue for international student internships, but some employers don’t know about it and others don’t understand it so are reluctant to try it. More effort is needed to promote CPT and OPT (Optional Practical Training, which facilitates employment after graduation) among US employers.

Students are eager to work more closely with CCO. Those who know Darshini Render feel happy she is there.