Final Report

International Students
Focus Group Series

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WHAT WAS YOUR ASSESSMENT PROJECT ABOUT?

We undertook this project to better understand the international student experience. Recent survey data show that international students differ from domestic students at Purdue in ways we did not understand.1 Those resources provide a useful perspective, yet they leave important questions unanswered. The following details attracted our interest especially:

• According to the 2010 NSSE survey of student engagement about one in four first-year international students NEVER had a “serious conversation with students of a different race or ethnicity” than their own. We wondered how international students could function on a large campus like Purdue’s without having such conversations at least occasionally.

• In dozens of survey questions, international students’ answers had a lower mean value and a smaller standard deviation than the answers given by US students. This made us wonder whether the results indicate actual differences of opinion, or instead a systematic difference in attitudes toward surveys. The former explanation would mean international students are less happy about almost everything at Purdue and would, if true, require urgent action. The latter option could mean that international students’ survey responses, though nominally different from domestic students’, indicate roughly the same attitude.

• According to other survey information, international students are eager to engage more fully in campus activities. We wanted to discover any barriers to their becoming more engaged and to learn what can be done to help them get more involved.

Survey data confirmed these statements. But surveys could not explain why. We therefore undertook a series of focus groups in which we could converse with students.

Partners in the project included staff from the College of Liberal Arts, Division of Housing and Food Services, International Students and Scholars, and the Division of Student Affairs. These four partners encompass both academic and co-curricular experiences and provide most on-campus student services to international students.

We developed a battery of questions, based on particular concerns of one of the partners or on survey data or other previous research. These questions were consolidated into eight sets of questions. We

1 The instruments we considered include the 2010 National Survey of Student Engagement, the 2010 Student Importance and Satisfaction Survey, the 2011 Foundations of Excellence Student Survey, 2012 Multi-institutional Study of Leadership, the 2012 International Student Barometer, and the 2013 Purdue Student Satisfaction Survey.
designed a protocol in which each focus group session was 90 minutes and addressed two of the eight question sets. The schedule of sessions is laid out in Attachment II.

Students were invited by the International Students and Scholars office. Their extensive contact information with all international students enabled them to enlist particular subsets of international students (Chinese, Indian, graduate students, women, etc.) as needed to meet each session’s particular focus. Students were invited by email and incentivized by food, a certificate of participation and a nominal gift.

A transcriptionist was present at each session to record students’ comments and make observations (“heads nodding in agreement” or “long pause,” etc.). The sessions were also recorded electronically so that comments could be quoted exactly.

WHAT WERE THE RESULTS OF THE PROJECT? WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

We learned much from the focus groups. Three major findings are summarized here. These and others are more fully substantiated in Attachment I.

International students rely heavily on their national student associations. The associations provide many services directly to their members. But reliance on these sources alone, without ongoing engagement between Purdue departments and these organizations, can keep students in the dark about University policies or about potentially useful services.

Many students view their association as a one-stop source of information about Purdue. Prospective students contact the student associations long before they arrive on campus. In many cases, those new students are met at the airport and shuttled to their residence hall or apartment by the associations. However, some students rely too heavily on the associations. A representative of PUCSSA (Purdue University Chinese Students and Scholars Association) corroborates this: “Sometimes I think we 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.”

As part of our process we organized an “Ask an Administrator” session at which international students could ask questions of top Purdue administrators. The session was advertised heavily through multiple direct email invitation to all international students and by social media and personal appeals, yet fewer than 50 students attended. Those 50 were nearly all representatives of national associations, and nearly every association we invited was represented by multiple members. We feel that this illustrates how international students rely on their association. Interested students knew their association would attend the meeting, and felt they need not attend themselves.

The associations are willing partners in efforts to improve awareness of and access to campus services. All Purdue departments should consider ways of working with the associations, or at least using them as information conduits, to help inform international students of policies and resources. For their part, international students should often deal more directly with University services.
International students have a different perspective about opinion surveys than American students. Their answers are sincere and useful, but cultural differences affect the outcomes. Data analysts ought to take these differences into account when analyzing opinion data.

It is beyond the scope of this project to explain the many, diverse sociological perspectives international students bring to surveys. But international students from Europe, the Caribbean, India and China all said that difference exists. They said they prefer moderate answers and they are reluctant to choose “1” or “5” on a 1-5 Likert scale question. Corroboration from the focus groups included this statement: “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.”

Survey data suggests, prima facie, that international students are less satisfied with Purdue programs and services. Our focus group findings refute this and suggest apparent differences in sentiment may result from survey-taking habits. Our findings alert us that better methods of measuring student opinion on Purdue’s campus (and nationwide) are needed. Any conclusion based on opinion data that contrasts international opinion with that of domestic students must take differing predilections into account. We should all be more critical of surveys and insist that instruments produce clear, reliable and accurate answers for all students.

Cordial relationships between US and international students at Purdue are the exception. Such happy friendships do occur, but they are uncommon and often fleeting. Student-to-student relationships are the weakest component of the international student experience. International students in our focus groups affirmed the “great divide” between students.

Often the focus group participants provided no-fault explanations for the lack of student interaction. They suggested that sticking with one’s own group is the logical and natural way to get along. They said that even if language were no barrier they know and care little about American pop culture discussion topics, that many American students don’t share their aspirations to global citizenship, etc. They also said forced collaboration in academic group projects often creates tension. Even when cooperation is cordial, those ad hoc classroom relationships often end when the project is finished rather than leading to enduring friendships.

On the other hand, we heard gratifying stories of meaningful friendships forming through diverse activities. Students gave credit to particular individuals who reached out to them. Students mentioned residence hall parties, mentorships initiated by academic advisors, and co-curricular clubs as places where they found happy and enriching cross-cultural relationships. The enthusiasm we observed from students telling about their special American friends belies the notion that they only want to stick with their kind. We conclude that most international students want friendships with American students and do not feel they have sufficient opportunity to build them.

According to the 2012 MSL Survey, 33.9% of Asian students agree that Purdue has “a general atmosphere of prejudice” among students. Only a third of respondents agreed with the statement, but the phrasing of the questions (“a general atmosphere of prejudice”) is a strong indictment. Questions about faculty and staff indicated less perception of discrimination (19.7% and 19.0% respectively). Those questions were worded to ask about even isolated instances and are not directly comparable to the student question.
Our project did not aspire to balance the perspectives of international and domestic students. Our focus was international students only. However, we submit Attachment III as evidence that the coolness perceived by some international students is actually present among some domestic students.

**What was the impact of the project on your program?**

The focus group series confirmed the concerns that we had previously speculated on. We now have a better understanding of where to focus ongoing efforts to improve student services.

There is no urgent need to revamp all services, as there would have been if the apparent lower levels of satisfaction we observed in surveys was genuine. But since we believe international students are generally satisfied with services at Purdue we can focus efforts on fewer and more particular issues. For example, the Division of Housing and Food Services can focus on more dining options for Hindu residents whose dining requirements are not well served by the current vegetarian menu.

The way forward, though clearer now, remains complicated. We understand that national student groups are an essential and inevitable information broker for many students – especially those from countries with large contingents at Purdue. We will develop new ways to use those groups as resources to disseminate information. At the same time, we will work to ensure that every student has full access to all services and that advising and counseling remain personal and individual. For example, we hope the national associations can help us spread the word about the many services that are available, including career counseling, personal counseling and academic advising. But we do not want students to hear through the associations that a certain course of action was recommended to one student and then decide that they should do the same without conferring with professional staff.

Purdue is a land grant college in a conservative and largely rural midwestern state. It is also an international magnet for top talent. Through this project we recognize the need to bring the diverse students together. Our student activities, though numerous, large, popular and successful, don’t always promote cross-cultural inclusiveness.

**What’s next?**

Each of the four partners in this project has its agenda for putting the findings of the project to use. Here are a few efforts we plan in response to what was learned.

- International Students & Scholars will:
  1. Promote, expand and refine BGRi;
  2. Extend outreach to national student organizations to partner in driving and creating opportunities for internationals to interact with domestic students;
  3. Work with Student Affairs to develop an international student leadership program that fosters involvement;
  4. Expand volunteer opportunities/programming outside campus;
5) Develop strategic partnerships with academic units to integrate cross-cultural activities into the syllabi of broadly taught courses;
6) Advance the “interaction conversation” on campus in light of the new core outcomes that require intercultural competence/knowledge.

The Division of Student Affairs will:

1) Propagate the message to all its departments and urge all to implement programs that encourage inclusion;
2) Ensure that all departments are equipped to serve international students, either by hiring specific specialists or by providing additional training to staff;
3) More effectively disseminate information about opportunities for engagement through all means, including improved websites and social media;
4) Reach out to other divisions (e.g., academic advising) with the lessons learned;
5) Work with PACT and other survey partners to incorporate the findings into future survey design.

Further, through the Office of Student Activities & Organizations:

6) Continue to facilitate connections and collaboration between international student organizations and traditional campus organizations such as PUDM, Old Masters, etc. to get more international students involved;
7) Continue to facilitate collaboration between international student organizations and university departments, to satisfy needs and achieve mutually beneficial goals;
8) Host a series of workshops for student organizations to promote inclusion and a better understanding among international student leaders of the impact they have on the student experience;
9) Foster links between international student groups and official University contacts, to better convey accurate information about opportunities and resources;
10) Create an International Student Leaders Roundtable, hosted by Dean Mike Brezinski, to bring international student leaders more fully into the University’s process, address challenges within the international student population, promote information sharing, and provide resources for leaders to share with their members;
11) Continue collaboration with Student Affairs and ISS staff to develop and implement an international student leadership program that fosters involvement.

The Division of Housing & Food Services will:

1) Work through its vegetarian advisory committee to expand and improve offerings for Hindu students and other strict vegetarian or vegan residents;
2) Improve the inclusion portion of the first-year experience in University Residences as well as PSUB programming.

The College of Liberal Arts will:

1) College of Liberal Arts Recruitment Office will develop a communication plan to fit the needs of international students. This plan will include online chats for prospective international students and their parents and informative emails assisting students and parents with the admission process and identifying Liberal Arts majors;
2) Rely on the new College of Liberal Arts’ Coordinator of International Student Services to review the focus group findings and develop additional policy responses.