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## **In Their Words: Student Preparation and Perspectives on US Study**

US universities are admitting higher percentages of international students, bringing into focus concerns with how to best support them once they are at the university. However, less attention has been paid to the preparation they undertake before matriculation. This study looks at how students are prepared before arrival and how this preparation matched their expectations and experiences in their US classes. Information was gathered through interviews of international students in different US universities, as well as from large-scale surveys conducted at the University of California, Berkeley with incoming and current international students. Results suggest the need for additional program planning to more fully support this population.

### **Introduction**

As US universities and colleges admit higher percentages of international students, much of students' preparation for attending US universities is focused on the formidable admissions process, from studying for TOEFL or IELTS exams to writing and editing the statement of purpose. In this equation, less attention may be focused on actual performance culturally or academically once admitted. As a result, issues such as academic stress (Wan, Chapman, & Biggs, 1992), mismatches between student and instructor goals (Matsuda, 2006), and, of course, language barrier issues arise. These factors no doubt influence the effective teaching of international students studying in the US.

There already is substantial discussion about how colleges and universities should serve the needs of their growing international student populations, from the perspectives of language support (Andrade, Evans, & Hartshorn, 2014), general academic support (Bista, 2015), as well as social and cultural support (Baba & Hosoda, 2014).

However, less has been written about how students prepare themselves for study in the US before arrival. Much of what has been written focuses on tips for success (Kruse & Brubaker, 2007) or documents the trends in international enrollment (Alberts, 2007).

With respect to international students who planned to study in the US, this research explored what preparation for US study students undertook before arrival, concerns they had before arrival, and how well their expectations for US study were met.

This information was gathered primarily through questionnaires and interviews and secondarily through analysis of data available from a large-scale survey done with incoming international students at the University of California, Berkeley. While many of the same issues discussed above (e.g., academic expectations, cultural expectations) were identified, the results discussed here approach the issues as identified by students themselves, in their own words, reinforcing the need for institutions to more fully support their international students in these areas.

### **Background to the Issue**

According to the IIE Center for Academic Mobility Research and Impact Institute of International Education, in 2013-2014 the US attracted 886,052 international students, making it the top destination for international study. In response, US educational institutions have increased support, both academic and social, for students. Additionally, there is increasing concern for recruiting and retaining students (Özturgut, 2013). Studies have also looked at international student satisfaction and experience in US universities (cf. Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010).

Of course, international students do not arrive as blank slates. While colleges and universities look for ways to support their academic and social needs, little attention has been paid in the literature to what these students have already done in preparation for study in the US. Some information exists, especially that focusing on specific national groups. For example, Hagedorn and Hu (2014), in an article about Chinese students preparing for study in the US, state:

In an effort to distinguish themselves from their peers and turn their dreams of a U.S. education into reality, Chinese students pursue additional coursework, intensive English language training, and alternative educational pathways. ... Chinese students ... must begin the process of distinguishing themselves from their peers long before they begin filling out college applications. (p. 76)

Also according to Hagedorn and Hu, some of the ways in which Chinese students prepare before arrival are by using agencies to help prepare application materials and to attend special college-preparation programs that last two or three years—these special programs include the international baccalaureate program (cf. Lee et al., 2014) and Global Access Certificate, international collaborative degrees (cf. Leong, 2015), and international summer school, among others.

### **Data**

Before we can make claims about students' influences before arrival in the US, it is important to understand not only the language skill levels and aptitude of international students, but also their preparation for and motivation to study before entering the university (cf. Csizér & Dörnyei, 2005). To this end, survey responses from students from different geographic locations were collected regarding their preparation and course work before studying in the US. Students were asked:

- What challenges have you faced as an international student in the USA?
- Did you have any special preparation for attending college in the USA? If so, explain what type (cram school, special courses, etc.).
- What parts of your preparation do you feel helped the most?
- Was there anything you were told about US study that turned out to be mostly untrue?
- What would have been helpful in your preparation that wasn't available to you?

Students were also given the opportunity to provide additional comments. Results from the interviews are presented here in narrative, rather than numerical form, because of the small number of participants surveyed ( $N=28$ ).<sup>1</sup> In addition to the narrative accounts, a needs assessment from April 2011 and a prearrival assessment from 2014, gathered by UC Berkeley's International Office (BIO), are included in this discussion.

### **Discussion**

The responses to both the interviews and surveys are grouped into four main categories:

1. Preparing and Arriving
2. Academic Culture and Expectations

3. US Culture and Student Life
4. Myths and Overgeneralizations.

### ***Preparing and Arriving***

Of course, all students prepare in some way to participate in college life. When asked about preparation, the international students interviewed had fairly uniform experiences, represented by these two responses:

Never considered studying abroad before September, 2012, but did take extra English courses for personal development and for interest. Took “cram school” for TOEFL and SAT after Sept. 2012.”—*Xu, China, UC Berkeley*

I took English classes offered by private institutes for a long time. In addition, I took two months of private tutoring in preparation for TOEFL test.—*Amira, Iran, UC Berkeley*

However, the respondents had more to say about what they wish they had done before arrival. While most focused on English language study, some focused more on higher-order skills in English, rather than just mastering the language:

Maybe some English vocabulary practice [would have been helpful]. Although my school was English medium, the level of English and analysis required for English texts was not as high as the US.—*Sanjay, India, UC Berkeley*

[I wish I had] been exposed further about verbal English; learning the ways to write [literary] analysis essays; basic knowledge abt US social systems in terms of government and current social issues; reading professional/scholarly articles.—*Kim, Korea, UC Berkeley*

More practice in reading and writing would [have been] more helpful. The focus of English classes offered in Iran is on speaking and listening skills.—*Amira, Iran, UC Berkeley*

From these statements, it seems that preparatory schools and courses focus on getting students into colleges through improving exam performance. However, these types of tasks do not match well with what students eventually encounter in the classroom: advanced analytical, reading, and writing skills that will lead to college success.

### *Academic Culture and Expectations*

A lot of adaptation to academic life came with perceptions (and misperceptions) about faculty. In the Berkeley survey (BIO, 2011), 50% indicated that they either agreed or somewhat agreed that relating to their professors was a challenge for them. Another 45.6% agreed or somewhat agreed that their ability to deal with faculty who were insensitive to their needs as an international student was of concern. In the narrative survey as well, students expressed various concerns about university faculty's not understanding the language difficulty of some students, or perceptions about language learning itself, as shown in these excerpted answers:

I don't know if professors realize this, but compared to other international students, Chinese students have harder problems on their English. Their accents may be better than other international students, but their grammar is not as good due to the striking difference between Chinese and English.—*Amy, China, Washington University, St. Louis*

This is reiterated in the following response, which also echoes the concern that educators do not understand the challenges that international students face:

The biggest challenges for students who want to study in the United States in my opinion, is the cultural barrier in addition to the language barrier that international students face upon entering the United States. International students are likely to face a culture shock upon initially entering the U.S. ... Educators need to realize the US students and International students from China have different learning styles as well as different teaching styles, educators must have an understanding of this to be able to effectively reach out to International from China who may need help.—*Jane, China, University of Connecticut*

Students also expressed a desire to know more about expectations before they arrive, as shown in these answers to the Berkeley survey (BIO, 2014):

I would like more information on course work, and would like to know what I could study during the summer before I come into Berkeley.—Response 256

More information on what to do before coming for choosing electives towards achieving career goals. ...—Response 260

It would be helpful to know what level of reading/writing is average for a UC Berkeley student. I am not sure how the English education I received at an international school compares to the one a typical UC Berkeley student has. —Response 290

These responses seem to indicate that students may not be prepared adequately for understanding what university expectations are for their language skills (beyond test scores, that is). Additionally, they believe that faculty either lack knowledge or are insensitive to their needs as international students.

### ***US Culture and Adaptation***

The cultural challenges that students face are wide-ranging and include many of the familiar topics, such as adaptation to a new culture and the ever-present language barrier. However, responses included interesting insights, such as student presumptions about the uniformity of American culture:

The biggest challenge is that when you try to make a conversation with the local white students, it is really hard. Since we have different backgrounds, when we try to talk with local students, we are assumed that they have the same cultural background but it is not. As a result, it is controversial that which culture should students who want to go abroad focus on. ... The success is from the academic field and the challenges are from the communication field of course. Especially Asians tend to hide themselves behind different book stacks and stay away from the activities.—*Wangyu, China, University of California, Los Angeles*

Issues of cultural adaptation of international students are well documented (e.g., Baba & Hosoda, 2014). However, the comment above is a good reminder that we need to be aware of monolithic representations of American culture, which may lead international students to feel ill prepared to understand complex, multicultural communities.

### ***Social and Student Life***

Students are also concerned with the connection between academic life and social life; the BIO survey indicates that more than 40% of both graduate and undergraduate students are concerned about finding a good balance between schoolwork and free time. Addition-

ally, more than 34% of undergraduates somewhat agree that relating to American students in their classes was an issue. Many respondents from China highlighted the difference between American students and Asian students, often stating that Asian students “have higher scores” than American students. However, this was often coupled with the observation that a lack of friends and social connections slowed social and language growth, as shown in this excerpt:

The problem is English or other language ability will be obstacle. But that is just personal issues, It needs time and effort to achieve English ability. ... [Chinese] have better scores than American students have, average. But they don't have any high school or local friends in school. So, it is hard for them to make foreign friends at the first time. So, Chinese students will get together for most of time.—*Jim, China, Ohio State University*

In the 2011 Berkeley survey, one respondent sums it up:

How to make friends in U.S. :) —Response 276

The students above point to a cycle of insularity and its causes. Students are insecure in making friends with students outside of their own culture because of both social and linguistic barriers. As a result, they often stay within their own language groups, further isolating them from making friends cross-culturally.

### ***Myths and Overgeneralizations***

Students received advice or held beliefs that they subsequently found not to be valid; for example, they were told:

Race and class was a thing of the past. I am not sure why I got this romantic idea into my head. It's definitely not true.—*John, unknown, UC Berkeley*

It's quite impossible to be good at social sciences courses since English is not your first language. But it turns out to be that studying social science is quite doable, as long as you pay effort.—*Xu, China, UC Berkeley*

International student from Indonesia like me should go to community college first because it's almost impossible to get into university directly.—*Sam, Indonesia, UC Berkeley*



That it would take a while to get used to it.—*Ajay, India, UC Berkeley*

Sometimes, when expectations were not as anticipated, it was not necessarily an unhappy situation, as reported by student “Kim”:

Very liberal to the point of danger. (A lot of adults told me this). Lonely and culture shock (I’m REALLY happy and being ‘Americanized’ *hehe*). Racism & language barrier. ... Strict time (I never had a problem of being in ‘Korean Time’ yet.)—*Kim, Korea, UC Berkeley*

Clearly, international students get a lot of bad advice and are sometimes steered away from areas of study, or even university study, because of assumptions about their ability to succeed linguistically.

### **Conclusion**

While the responses here reflect some of the same concerns found in the literature on international student experiences, in fact they represent a nuanced view of needs and experiences, from confronting multicultural environments, to being steered away from studying in the humanities and social sciences, to needing more preparation in the academic demands of reading and analysis required in US universities. Of course, the concerns about preparation and ongoing success relate directly to what we can and should do in our programs to first advise students in preparing for US study as well as what we should do once they matriculate.

Obviously, the continuing growth in international student population necessitates a deep commitment to understand the full breadth and depth of concerns that this population brings with it to our colleges and universities. Sherry, Thomas, and Chui (2010) state: “[I]nstitutions which do not address the unique needs of international students may leave these students feeling disappointed, unfulfilled, and even exploited” (p. 34). Addressing these needs means understanding what students already bring to the table by way of prior preparation, which preconceptions and prejudices prevent them from understanding the academic environments in which they find themselves, and of course, what programs and services to provide in response. To do this, more comprehensive needs analyses need to be published and aggregated, and more students need to be asked to talk about their expectations and experiences, in their own words.

## Author

Maggie Sokolik holds a BA from Reed College and MA and PhD from UCLA. She is the author of more than 20 ESL and composition textbooks. She is interim director of College Writing Programs, UC Berkeley, and is the founding editor of TESL-EJ, a peer-reviewed journal for ESL/EFL professionals. She also teaches several MOOCS through edX.org, enrolling more than 400,000 students to date.

## Note

<sup>1</sup>All names are pseudonyms, and participants gave permission to use their surveys. Representative answers are included in the text. Students' responses are unedited.

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