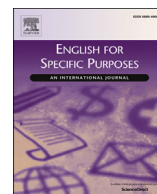


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“Step Out of the Cycle”: Needs, challenges, and successes of international undergraduates at a U.S. University



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ABSTRACT

A triangulated, mixed-methods needs analysis was conducted in order to inform the redesign of the English for Academic Purposes program that provides conditional undergraduate admission to a mid-sized U.S. university. Online surveys were completed by 191 students and 226 faculty. Although they largely agreed on the importance of 21 tasks and activities in undergraduate classes, students rated themselves as significantly more successful on most of them than did faculty. Qualitative data from open-ended comments and interviews with five international students provided both insight and complexity to the quantitative data. Factors for success (including persistence and engagement) and challenges for international students (linguistic, cultural, and academic) were identified as well as a need for greater tolerance from faculty and domestic students and better awareness and use of support services. Pedagogically, while academic literacy remains vital to university success, oral communication skills, especially the ability to engage in discussions and group work, are equally if not more important for international students.

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1. Background

The growth of international undergraduate students, especially from China, in the United States and other Anglophone countries has received a considerable amount of attention in both the professional and popular press (e.g., [Benzie, 2010](#); [Evans, Anderson, & Eggington, 2015](#); [Ewert, 2011](#); [Hammond, 2009](#); [Stevens, 2012](#); [Wingate, 2015](#)). One article ([Bartlett & Fischer, 2011](#)) focused on the authors' institution, portraying it for the most part as a good example of a university that was providing support for the new wave of international students, despite growing pains. Those challenges included push-back from some faculty unused to teaching international students as well as reports that international—especially Chinese—students were not integrating in and out of classes.

The University of Delaware (UD) is a medium-sized public university located on the East Coast of the United States. Although it has been home to an English Language Institute (ELI) for over 30 years, the university has only been offering a Conditional Admissions Program (CAP) for international students since 2003. Students admitted through CAP are exempt from submitting standardized English-language proficiency scores and instead meet the university's language requirement by passing a sequence of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses. Thanks in large part to CAP, the number of international undergraduates at the university skyrocketed from 153 in 2007 to 860 in 2014, approximately 70% of whom started their studies at the ELI. While this number still accounts for a small proportion of the undergraduate student body (3.8% in 2016), the increase is noticeable across the campus: faculty who might have occasionally taught international students now

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Table 1
Grade point averages at the University of Delaware (2013–2014).

Year of Study	U.S. domestic students	Former ELI international students	Directly-admitted international students
First year	2.93	2.83	2.77
Second year	3.03	2.97	2.89

Note: Maximum GPA is 4.0.

find them in every class. Furthermore, 70% of international undergraduates come from a single country, China (University of Delaware, 2014).

Bartlett and Fischer's (2011) article raised important questions about Chinese students' experiences after they graduate from the ELI and matriculate as undergraduates. Academically, the signs are positive: Internal data show that their grades start out a little behind the university average; however, they have almost closed the gap by the end of their second year of study, more quickly in fact than directly-admitted international students (Table 1). This success cannot solely be explained by Chinese students' presumed superiority in quantitative subjects, as Bartlett and Fischer claim, because of the university's general education requirements¹ and the sheer range of majors where international students are found.

Grades, however, are only part of the picture, representing end-products and not lived experiences. It is important to take a holistic view that accounts for academic achievement, interpersonal relationships, and cultural integration (Belcher & Lukkarila, 2011; Mamiseishvili, 2012). Therefore, as part of a review of the institute's EAP program, a comprehensive needs analysis was undertaken. This paper reports on the academic needs and strategies for success reported by international students and their faculty at UD.

2. Literature review

Needs analysis is at heart of the EAP approach (Bocanegra-Valle, 2016; Flowerdew, 2013; Hamp-Lyons, 2001). Existing needs analyses suggest the types of listening (Powers, 1986), oral communication (Ferris & Tagg, 1996a, 1996b), writing (Hale et al., 1996; Horowitz, 1986; Leki & Carson, 1997), and multi-skill (Huang, 2010; Johns, 1981; Rosenfeld, Leung, & Oltman, 2001) tasks ESL university students need. However, these findings must be treated with caution for the purposes of program design since needs analysis is essentially local and varies over time (Long, 2005).

Unsurprisingly, literacy has been the focus of a substantial number of previous studies of the needs of both L1 and L2 students (Evans, Anderson, & Eggington, 2015; Hale et al., 1996; Leki & Carson, 1997; Leki, 1995; Melzer, 2009; Wardle, 2009), although others have noted the importance of listening and, to a lesser extent, speaking skills (Ferris & Tagg, 1996a, 1996b; Johns, 1981). While writing is demanded of undergraduates regardless of the type of university and field of study (Hale et al., 1996) and the receptive skills of reading and listening are undoubtedly central to academic study (Johns, 1981), there are other, perhaps determining, factors in international students' perseverance and success. In a study that is closest in design to the one described here, Huang (2010) asked 432 ESL students and 93 instructors at a Canadian university to assess their or their students' ability to complete 45 different tasks, and speaking emerged as the domain in which students needed the most help.

Beyond the purely academic, though, lies a growing interest in international students' engagement on U.S. campuses. For example, in Andrade's (2006) review of ESL undergraduates' adjustment factors, social challenges caused greater difficulties than academic ones. Furthermore, Gareis (2012) estimates that almost 40% of international students do not have a single American friend. This leads to concerns about isolation and lack of interaction between domestic and international students (Leask & Carroll, 2011). International students themselves rate having friends from both their home and host cultures as a factor that influences their persistence (Andrade & Evans, 2009). These challenges are not unique to the U.S. context; a nationwide study of international student engagement in Australian universities linked lower levels of satisfaction with the university experience to significantly greater attrition rates than their domestic peers (Coates, 2009). Benzie (2010) likewise argues that English proficiency in Australian universities should not be measured purely in academic success but also in students' ability to integrate and interact with the campus community. This is consistent with Tinto's (1998) theory of resistance and persistence in higher education, summarized concisely by Andrade and Evans (2009): "Integration must occur both socially and academically. Without some measure of social and intellectual integration, a student's chances of continued persistence in higher education dramatically decrease" (p. 28).

Closely related to this need for deeper engagement are differences in cultural schema between international and mainstream domestic students. As Stevens (2012) has suggested, Chinese students—the largest foreign population on our campus and in the United States overall (Institute of International Education, 2016)—often arrive with little understanding of U.S. culture, history, values, and customs, and may try to enact cultural practices that put them in conflict with their professors and classmates. For instance, based on a small sample, Bodycott (2009) found that Chinese undergraduates and their parents place little value on extracurricular activities and learning about western culture, focusing instead on academic matters (see also Andrade & Evans, 2009). However, these same cultural schema are often critical for academic success in understanding lectures, discussions, and readings (Eggington, 2015; Sullivan, Zhang, & Zheng, 2012).

¹ Undergraduate students at this and most U.S. universities are required to take courses outside their major field of study as their "general education" or "distribution" requirements.

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