

International Student Needs Assessment

In the Fall 2017, the International Students and Scholars office (ISS) conducted a comprehensive needs assessment of UCR international graduate students. In October 2017, the ISS director met with a focus group composed of 14 randomly selected graduate students representing 7 different countries and different disciplines (Humanities, Engineering, CNAS). Subsequently, a survey was mailed to 1,055 international graduate students covering topics that included:

- Demographic information
- Personal, social, and academic concerns
- Mental Health
- Experiences with university-wide services
- Experiences with International Students & Scholars Office

A total of 263 (25%) surveys were completed and returned.

Demographic Information of Respondents:

- Gender: Male 56.7 % female 42.1%.
- Age: 52.3% were in the 25-30 age range, and 31.7% were in the 21-24 age range.
- Status: Single 79.4% reported being single with 93.3% reporting having no children
- Country of Origin: Countries with the largest respondents include China (34%), Iran (16.6%), India (14.1%).
- Level of Study: PhD students 70.4% Masters students 29.6%.
- Colleges: 44.5% report being in BCOE and 23.1% are studying in AGSM and 11.9% in CNAS.
- 71.4 % of respondents have been here for 2 years or less with approximately half of those being here 6 months or less.
- 80 % live in private off campus apartments
- Competitive Funding and Research Opportunities are the biggest reason for students to choose UCR (51%).

Concerns:

After reviewing all the responses and considering the comments made during the focus group meeting, nine themes emerged.

1. **Financial Concerns:** Having adequate financial support was of concern to 86.5% of respondents. 80.2% of students agreed or somewhat agreed that financial support from their departments is insufficient to meet their needs. Graduate students with families were particularly concerned about having adequate financial support for their families (88.2%). A large number of respondents expressed concerns about obtaining grants or other funding for their studies (75.3 %). ISS has also received several inquiries from students who are not sure whether there are any grant opportunities available for non-U.S. citizens.

Recommendations:

- Create a comprehensive list of grants and funding opportunities that are available to non-U.S. citizens and post it on the website. Offer grant writing workshops for non-native speakers.
- Develop an emergency tuition loan program for students who experience unforeseen economic hardships (e.g. loss of funding, sudden and sharp currency devaluation, family crisis).

2. Academic Concerns:

English language proficiency was the biggest academic concern for students in this survey. More than half of students indicated that they found it challenging to keep up with their writing (59.4 %) and reading (54.7%) assignments. Communicating in English and understanding spoken English was also challenging for more than 67% of students.

Accessing support for writing assignments (proof-reading, editing) was of great concern to 58.9% of students in this survey. Similar concerns were expressed by students attending the focus group. Students stated that it takes 30 days or longer to make an appointment with a writing tutor in the Grad Division. In addition, after the long wait, the appointment time is insufficient to review various assignments students need to complete throughout the term.

Recommendations:

- In collaboration with UNEX, assess admitted international graduate students' English language proficiency prior to their arrival. There are various online tools that measure students' oral and written language proficiency (e.g. ProctorU).
- Develop summer academy or "Bridge" programs for graduate students in Engineering, Natural Sciences and Humanities. There are currently some pathway programs for the School of Management.
- Offer more one-on-one mentoring opportunities for international graduate students who are experiencing difficulties with their writing assignments.
- Develop a Peer Mentor Program specifically for the 1st year international graduate students. The current Peer Mentor Program offered by the Grad Division is only able to assist 3% of international students at UCR.

3. Interactions with faculty and staff:

More than 50% of graduate students in this survey indicated that they either agreed or somewhat agreed that their ability to deal with faculty and staff who are insensitive to their needs as international students is of concern to them. 52.6% of respondents stated that it is challenging to find a role model or a mentor.

Recommendations:

- Offer more social opportunities for faculty and students to interact. The majority of students (61.3%) in this survey indicate that they would attend events sponsored by their academic departments.
- Develop new venues for the faculty and students to co-present and collaborate.
- Create a new recognition program for the faculty who act as an ally or role model to international graduate students.

4. Mental Health Concerns:

12.3% of students indicated that they came to the university with personal experience of a mental health problem (e.g. anxiety, depression, eating disorders, bipolar, personality disorders and schizophrenia). However, since being at UCR, the mental health problems among respondents have increased to 23.3%.

When experiencing a mental health problem or feeling stressed at the university, the majority of respondents prefer to seek help from friends (38%) rather than resources on campus (CAPS 16.7%; Graduate Advisor 7.4%; ISS 3.1%). According to the graduate students attending the focus group, it takes more than 5 weeks before they receive a counseling appointment at CAPS.

Recommendations:

- Implementing the recommendations outlined in this study will greatly reduce some of the sources of stress and mental health concerns for international graduate students. (e.g. assisting students with their English language needs and offering a well-defined career pathway).
- Since CAPS seems to be understaffed, it is recommended that they offer more outreach programs to large groups of students (e.g. international support group; stress and time-management trainings). We are also recommending that CAPS designate specific counselors who would primarily assist international students.

5. Sexual harassment reporting:

More than 45% of respondents indicated that they would not report a complaint like sexual harassment to their departments or ISS office. In terms of reporting, students preferred anonymous methods like telephone helpline (33.1%), speaking to CAPS (24%) or the Title IX office (21.4%).

Recommendations:

- ISS is currently working together with the WELL and Healthy Campus initiative to create a support group for international women where they feel safe to share their concerns and difficulties with each other and ISS staff.
- Offer more training for both male and female international students during orientation and throughout the year, engaging international students in conversations about the culture of respect and safety at UCR.

6. Extra-Curricular Activities:

Other than academic departments (61.3% sometime to frequently) and GSA sponsored programs (50.3%), the majority of respondents indicated that they rarely or never participate in the campus activities identified in the survey. Based on the responses, we wonder, to what extent does lack of participation in extra-curricular activities lead to feelings of isolation among international graduate students?

Recommendations:

- Continue and enhance the number of social programs by academic departments.
- In collaboration with departments and GSA, offer opportunities for international graduate students to showcase their research projects to the campus community.
- 82% of all students in this survey found the quality of services provided by the Student Recreation Center to be good or excellent. In collaboration with the Rec Center, we need to coordinate Intramural sport activities as well as excursions and camping trips for both domestic and international graduate students.

7. Future Plans:

Securing a job in the U.S. after graduation was a primary concern for 76.5% of all the respondents in this survey. 63.7% of respondents expressed interest in either working temporarily in the US on a practical training (42.6%) or live and working here beyond practical training (21.1%).

Recommendations:

- Continue to offer visa trainings for specific departments on opportunities and challenges of working in the U.S. after graduation.
- This year, the Career Center is developing a number of new initiatives for graduate students (e.g. “Get Hired” and “Now Hiring” series). Continue these programs and tailor these workshops to meet the needs of international graduate students.
- Offer more assistance to graduate students with their application process and interview skills to ensure they are competitive in the U.S. job market.
- This year, we have had two country-specific organizations reach out to UCR to recruit students from China and Taiwan. To help international students transition smoothly into their home country’s job market, we recommend continuing to develop additional relationships with similar governmental and recruitment agencies.
- Offer an International Career Fair for both international and education abroad students.

- Network with international alumni in the U.S. and overseas. International alumni could serve as great source of career mentorship and networking for international students.

8. Understanding the needs of international students

In general, respondents felt that the UCR staff frequently or sometimes understand their needs as international students. However, they rated the quality of services provided by Parking Services (60.2%), Housing (56.7%) and Health Center (37.2%) as fair or poor.

In terms of campus-wide services provided for graduate students, it is quite noteworthy that a large percentage of international graduate students rarely or never use the services provide by CAPS (66.5%), Graduate Writing Center (58.6%), and the Career Center (53.5%).

Recommendations:

- Given the student demographics at UCR, most of these services have traditionally focused on the needs of undergraduate students. ISS and Grad Division need to work more closely with these units and advocate for services that are more specific to graduate students.
- Since international student needs for Writing assistance is greater than the current capacity at the Graduate Writing program, we recommend utilizing some instructors in the Intensive English Program (IEP) at UNEX to offer specific writing workshops and one-on-one tutoring for international graduate students.

9. Experience with the International Students & Scholars office:

Overall, respondents agree or somewhat agree that:

- ISS office location is accessible (84.7%)
- They view ISS as an advocate for international students (82.7%)
- The ISS staff is interested in their needs (82.6%)
- ISS advisors are helpful (77.8%)
- They are courteous (80.4%)
- They provide useful information (78.4%)

In spite of a high level of satisfaction with the services provided by ISS for graduate students, it is noteworthy that very few graduate students would reach out to ISS staff if they experience a mental health issue (3.1%) or in the event that they are a victim or a witness of sexual harassment (16.2%). Students attending the focus group also expressed some difficulties talking with the ISS staff about personal issues and challenges they face.

In terms of communication with ISS, most respondents use email (61.1%) as preferred method of contact. However, several students in the focus group complained that last year, they had to wait up to 3 weeks to get a response from ISS staff.

Although 62.5% reported using the ISS website in the past year between 1-5 times, only 16.8% indicated the information they found on the website was always helpful. Similar frustration was expressed by students attending the focus group. Students indicated that they are using other

colleges and universities websites for finding accurate and clear information addressing their needs. They stressed that having a clear website has a great impact on international students, especially before they leave their countries and are preparing to come to UCR.

Another area of concern by graduate students was the relevance of ISS programs for graduate students. They felt that ISS programs are focused primarily on international undergraduate students. This was quite evident in this survey as well. The majority of respondents never or rarely participate in ISS activities (ISS workshops 40.7%; International Peer Assistants events 22.2%, Global Community Program 19.7%).

Recommendations:

- Considering the fact that ISS was significantly understaffed (student to advisor ratio 800:1) last year, it is quite understandable that our services were seriously limited and students did not feel we were very accessible. However, starting Fall 2017, we have been able to double the size of our students advising staff to 4 international student advisors and a program coordinator. This position focuses primarily on programing for graduate students.
- Also, we have adopted an “Open Door” policy that has made us accessible to students all day from Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. In addition, we have obtained a new mobile phone for emergencies and after hour access. This is particularly helpful as our students (and scholars) travel overseas and, at times, experience difficulties with re-entry at different hours of the day.
- Overhauling and updating the international student website. In collaboration with Student Life and the GradSuccess, we also hope to join the UCR Guidebook project. UCR Guides is a new mobile app that is widely used by both graduate and undergraduate students.

Summary of Recommendations

The following recommendations require additional institutional support. Also, we recommend the formation of an “International Student Advisory” taskforce to further review and provide a timeline for implementing these recommendations.

Pre-arrival: Offering a pre-arrival webinar to respond to students’ questions and concerns about UCR and the community. Use technology (e.g. ProctorU) to assess students’ oral and written English language skills and preparedness prior to their arrival.

Arrival/orientation: Provide appropriate assistance in acquiring housing and other accommodations for their new life in the larger UCR community. In collaboration with the University Extension and the Graduate Division, offer “bridge” or “pathway” programs throughout the summer. These programs offer intensive English language training and intercultural communication courses for new international students with a low level of English language proficiency. Offer a comprehensive orientation program that encourages interaction

among international and domestic graduate students as well as creating a global mindset among UCR faculty and staff.

The current Peer Mentor Program at the Graduate Division is insufficient to meet the demand. At this time, it can only assist 3% of international graduate students. ISS has a Peer Advising program that is more targeted at undergraduate students. We require additional resources to develop a new peer mentor program that is specifically for international graduate students during their first year at UCR.

Develop an emergency loan program for students with unforeseen economic hardship.

Professional Development: In collaboration with the Career Center offer career preparedness workshops and job search strategies for international graduate students. Ensure that students are fully prepared and competitive in the U. S. and global job market. Continue and enhance collaboration with international recruitment agencies (e.g. Lockin China, DISCO International for Japanese students) and governmental agencies (e.g. Taiwanese Trade Center). Engage with International Alumni.

Long-term recommendation: Study the feasibility and value of creating an International Center to serve as a central resource for internationalizing all UCR students, faculty and staff. Develop academic and social programming targeting both domestic and international student.