

International Undergraduate Students Needs Assessment

In the Winter of 2018, the International Students and Scholars office (ISS) conducted a comprehensive needs assessment of UCR international undergraduate students. A survey was mailed to 588 undergraduate international 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 80 (14 %) surveys were completed and returned.

Demographic Information of Respondents:

- Gender: Female: 56.3, Male: 40.8 %, Decline to Answer: 2.8 %
- Age: 52.3% were in the 17-24 age range, and 31.7% were in the 25-36 age range.
- Marital Status: 98.6.4% reported being single.
- Country of Origin: Countries with the largest respondents include China (32.4%), India (9.9 %), Taiwan (7%).
- Colleges: 52.2 % report being in CHASS, 18.8 % in CNAS, 15.9% in BCOE and 13 % in the School of Business.
- Level/Class of Study: 54 % of respondent's report being at the junior (30 %) or freshman level (24 %). 7 % of respondents reported being exchange students.
- 80.3 % of respondents have been here for two years or less.
- 34 % of respondents take 12-14 credits per quarter, 35 % take 14-16 credits, 31 % take more than 16 units.
- 66 % live in private off campus apartments, 13 % live in the residence halls and 13% live off-campus with a family.
- Receiving their I-20 (20 %) and the Geographic location of UCR (18%) are the biggest reasons for students to choose UCR (38%).
- 79 % of respondents are planning to complete their Bachelor's degree at UCR.

Themes:

After reviewing all the responses, the following themes emerged:

1. **Financial Concerns:** Having adequate financial support was of concern to 79 % of undergraduates and 67 % of respondents would like to find a job on campus to support their career development and earn extra money.

Recommendations:

- Collaborate with the Career Center and key campus departments to create, highlight and promote on-campus employment opportunities for undergraduate international students.

- Explore the possibility of providing a local pool of funding/scholarship to support “work-study” opportunities for non-immigrants (F & J)—similar to President Napolitano’s work-study support for DACA students.
- Develop an emergency tuition loan program for students who experience unforeseen economic hardship (e.g. loss of funding, sudden and sharp currency devaluation, family crisis).

2. Academic Concerns:

Respondents cited academic challenges (25%) as the most challenging aspect of their studies at UCR. Students agree/somewhat agree that relating to American students in their classes (53.3 %), Understanding degree requirements (51.1 %) and seeking help from professors (51.1%), are the top three academic concerns.

Recommendations:

- Connect faculty, academic advisors and peers from the respective colleges through a pilot pre-arrival mini courses/webinar that addresses US/research university classroom culture, degree requirements and interaction with American peers.
- ISS needs to collaborate more closely with academic advisors in various departments. Offer info sessions and advising opportunities for academic advisors, particularly in CHASS during International Student Orientation.

3. Interactions with faculty and staff:

More than 50% of undergraduate students in this survey 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.

Recommendations:

- Re-establish a recognition program for the faculty/staff who act as an ally or role model to undergraduate international students (international student champions).
- Create a “shout-out” communications piece and personalized thank you letters to spotlight the professors and courses that identified by students in the survey (website, Facebook, newsletter, UCR magazine).
- Continue to offer “supporting international student success’ training sessions for staff across campus (including academic advisors) and promote more international student participation in the training sessions.
- Develop new venues for the faculty and students to co-present and collaborate.

4. Mental Health Concerns:

20 % of students indicated that they already came to the university with a personal experience of mental health problem (e.g. anxiety, depression, eating disorders, bipolar, personality disorders and schizophrenia). Since being at UCR, the mental health problems among undergraduate respondents have increased to 29 %. The three top causes

of extra pressure/stress reported: Course work (20 %), Career concerns (20 %) and Loneliness (17 %).

When experiencing a mental health problem or feeling stressed at the university, the majority of respondents prefer to seek help from Friends (42%) and Parents/Family (33 %) rather than resources on campus (CAPS 10 %); Academic Advisor (4 %); ISS (6%).

Recommendations:

- Since the majority of respondents prefer to seek help from friends, it is important to continue to educate and train our peers, student assistants and campus organizations how to respond, support, refer and destigmatize mental health issues.
- Implementing recommendations outlined in this study will reduce some of the sources of stress and mental health concerns for international undergraduate students.
- Strengthen partnerships with CAPS and UCR Case management.
 - Quarterly liaison meetings (CAPS-ISS)
 - Invite a CAPS counselor to select ISS events throughout the year (ISU coffee hour, Welcome Dinner, ISO/IPA/GCP partner training).

5. Sexual harassment reporting:

More than 51% of respondents (45) 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 (40 %).

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.
- Identify other anonymous helplines for students to share their concerns and challenges (e.g. Morneau Shapell) .
- Engaging international students in conversations about the culture of respect and safety at UCR.

6. Interactions with Peers/Extra Curricular Activities-Engagement

Survey respondents reported Making friends (20 %) as the second most challenging aspect of their studies at UCR. Respondents agreed or somewhat agreed that having enough friends (65 %) and making friends with Americans (62 %) is of concern. Participation in ISS and residence hall programs was reported between 24 and 31 % by respondents to this survey. IPA events/activities (31 %), ISS workshops (29 %), Global Connections Program (GCP, 27 %).

Recommendations:

- 71 % of respondents indicated that they participated in student clubs and organizations. We need to continue to strengthen our outreach to key student

organizations across campus and capitalize on our partnership with the International Student Union (ISU).

- Look into creating a common ground dialogue team to promote understanding and interaction amongst American and International Students.
- ISS is piloting language round tables to create more opportunities for American/international peer engagement.
- Continue to strengthen programs that focus on interaction between American and International Students (e.g. Conversation Partner programs).
- 81% 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 undergraduate students.

7. Future Plans

Securing a job in the U.S. after graduation was a primary concern for 79 % of respondents in this survey. 63 % of respondents expressed interest in either working temporarily in the US on a practical training (38 %) or living and working here indefinitely (27%).

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 international students (e.g. “Get Hired”). Continue and expand these programs and tailor them to meet the needs of international undergraduate students.
- This year, we have had two country-specific organizations that have reached out to UCR for recruiting students from China and Taiwan. Continue to develop more relationships with similar governmental and recruitment agencies to help with placement and smooth transition of international students into their home country job market.
- 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 a great source of career mentorship and networking for international students.
- In collaboration with the Career Center, continue to develop network of employers who sponsor international students.
- Create, highlight and promote more career oriented opportunities (internships/on-campus jobs) for undergraduate international students throughout their academic program. Survey participants rated more on campus jobs (24%) and access to internships (24 %) as services that would be the most helpful. Continue to explore ways to recognize/highlight these experiences (internship credits/certificates).

8. Experience with the International Students & Scholars office:

Overall, respondents agree or somewhat agree that:

- ISS office location is accessible (78.6%)

- They view ISS as an advocate for international students (73 %)
- The ISS staff is interested in their needs (73.8%)
- ISS advisors understand their concerns (68.9 %) and are helpful (65.9%)
- Staff at the front desk are respectful (73.8%), knowledgeable (61.9 %) and helpful (59.5 %)

Although, 67.5% reported using the ISS website in the past year, only 16.3% indicated it was always helpful. 41.9 % of respondents indicated that it was sometimes helpful.

48 % of respondents reported utilizing MyForms and 71.5 % of respondents indicated that they were Extremely Satisfied (4.8 %) or Somewhat satisfied (66.7 %) with MyForms.

Recommendations:

- Considering the fact that ISS was understaffed 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.
- 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 are joining the UCR Guidebook, a new app that is widely used by both graduate and undergraduate students.

Build Bridges, Eliminate Barriers: Many undergraduate international students have reported that they are being sent from one office to another without having their question/issue solved. They also report getting conflicting information. As a campus, we need to better support our undergraduate international students in this area and work to eliminate any barriers. The front desk staff as well as advisors need to offer to contact the accounting office or their academic advisor for example, when they do not understand the charges on their bill and/or academic requirements. It is important that we advocate for our students in this way while maintaining positive relationships with key stakeholders. Our office needs to help create bridges and eliminate barriers.

Understanding American values (privacy, independence, etc.); 62 percent of respondents agree/somewhat agree that that Understanding American values is of concern to them. Training on these intercultural pieces needs to be incorporate into our programming and outreach to international/American students and faculty/staff.

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 implementation and assessment measures.

Pre-arrival: Offering a pre-arrival webinar to respond to students' questions and concerns about UCR and the community.

Arrival/Orientation: Provide appropriate assistance in acquiring housing and other accommodations for their new life in the larger UCR community. Offer a comprehensive orientation program that encourages interaction among international and domestic undergraduate students as well as creating a global mindset among UCR faculty and staff.

First Year Success (for first year freshmen and transfer students): Re-evaluate the feasibility of a first-year success course (e.g. Education) and strengthen partnerships with the colleges to promote first year success opportunities for freshmen and transfer student.

Initial I-20 Issuance:

- Receiving the initial I-20 first was cited as one of the primary reasons for selecting UCR. We recommend developing a plan centralize the I-20 Issuance for undergraduate students in International Affairs. In addition to minimizing confusion for newly admitted students, the timing for issuing I-20 might be a challenge for the Admissions staff who is often on the road focusing on the recruitment.
- All new students should be receiving a new I-20 with their admission packet as soon as admission decision is made. Since this is a common practice among most US universities, waiting until SIR is submitted puts UCR at a time disadvantage.

Emergency Loan Program: Develop an emergency loan program for students with unforeseen economic hardship and unforeseen and temporary changes in their funding. Currently, such students experience significant stress by having their enrollment being cancelled and not complying with the USCIS regulations for international students who need to maintain a full-time enrollment status while school is in session.

Co-curricular Opportunities and Professional Development: Continue current collaborations with the career center and develop opportunities for international and domestic students to pursue on-campus jobs and internships/community outreach (course credit/certificate/co-curricular transcript. 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). Initiate a new mentorship and networking program, engaging with international alumni.

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