How Do International Students Experience UI?

The number of international undergraduates at UI has greatly increased in recent years. International students were 1.7% of the entering class in 2007, just prior to this increase. In 2014, they were 12% of the entering class. International students now constitute more than 10% of our total undergraduate population.

In order to learn more about international student experiences at UI, we analyzed international student responses to the campus-wide SERU survey and compared them with responses of domestic students. Our goal was to identify:

- What are the factors associated with international students' satisfaction with academic life and sense of belonging at UI?
- In what ways are international students' perceptions of their undergraduate experience similar to and different from those of non-international students?
- What are implications of these findings for teaching, learning, and student success on our campus?

Findings from SERU

In brief, international students responding to SERU reported levels of engagement and satisfaction with faculty very similar to those reported by U.S. students, but there was much more variability in international student reported perceptions of their learning and sense of belonging in the UI community.

Academic Engagement

In their work with faculty, international students reported frequency of interaction, satisfaction with accessibility, and levels of engagement similar to or greater than those reported by U.S. students. International students were somewhat more likely to report interacting with faculty during lectures, and more likely to report working with faculty on other activities.

Academic Performance

International students on average reported more time studying than other students, less time socializing with friends, and less time partying. However, compared to other students, international students reported feeling that they have not learned as much in their field of study. We also observed that GPA appears to be related to how much students sense they have learned in their major.

Belonging

International students reported a lower sense of belonging at UI, significantly lower self-assessment of their social skills, and less satisfaction with their social experience on campus. Also, importantly, international students were significantly less likely to believe that students of their race were respected on campus; international students reported negative stereotypical comments from other students much more often than from faculty or staff.

Implications

These observations suggest strategic steps for faculty who are interested in taking action to further support international student engagement and success.

Student Experience in the Research University (SERU)

In 2013, UI joined a consortium of 16 research universities that administer the SERU Survey. SERU provides an extensive overview of student experience, overall satisfaction, academic and community engagement, evaluation of the major, and campus climate for diversity.

All undergraduates received email invitations to take the SERU survey online during spring semester. Students logged in with their student ID to take the survey, so responses could be linked to each student’s academic and demographic characteristics. We received responses from a total of 29.8% of UI undergraduates during 2013, and 24.3% during 2014.

This SERU Brief presents a snapshot of SERU findings about the undergraduate experience at UI and suggests implications for faculty who work with these students.

For more information about SERU, see [http://www.uiowa.edu/assessment/seru](http://www.uiowa.edu/assessment/seru)
**Academic Engagement:** International students’ reported levels of interaction and satisfaction with faculty suggest that in comparison with domestic students, their experiences are more similar than different. Strategies faculty use to support student learning are likely to benefit all students. Faculty who want to continue broadening and deepening levels of student engagement in their classes can:

- Help students organize their understanding of each day’s central concepts by outlining main points for the day at the beginning of class and providing a brief synthesis of main points at the end of class.
- Demonstrate and reinforce material from readings and lectures by making use of in-class activities, class discussion, and visual materials (such as boardwork and slides).
- Prepare students for class discussion with brief in-class writing or small group discussions that give them time to formulate their ideas before speaking up in the full class.
- Help students learn to assess their own learning with brief problem-solving activities or low-stakes quizzes that can help them identify gaps in their understanding and needs for further studying.

For additional strategies to facilitate student engagement, or to consult on the best ways to adapt these strategies for students in your classes, contact the Center for Teaching: teaching@uiowa.edu

**Academic Performance:** SERU responses suggest that many international undergraduates tend to associate “amount learned” with test results and grades, which may cause some to wonder how much they are getting out of their classes if they don’t achieve the grades they anticipated. Faculty can provide significant support for these students, who tend to report a lower sense of academic satisfaction and accomplishment, by focusing on learning achievements and deeper engagement with course material, rather than letting students focus only on grades.

- In feedback to students, draw attention to quality of thinking and learning in addition to points earned.
- Provide examples or draw connections to demonstrate how students can expect to use or build on the knowledge they are gaining in the course.
- Discuss your own interest in questions raised by the subject matter.
- Include assignments that ask students to demonstrate learning in ways that are distinct from achievement on tests, such as poster presentations or papers with more than one draft.

These suggestions are compatible with common practices for many faculty and likely to benefit all students. SERU responses suggest that these strategies may be particularly important for international student academic satisfaction and sense of achievement in their courses.

**Belonging:** International students are much more likely to report perceptions of bias in interactions with other students than in their interactions with faculty. Faculty can make a difference by facilitating interaction among students to foster a classroom climate in which all students are seen as valued.

- Structure collaborative work in class so that the same students are not always taking the lead, speaking on behalf of other students, or opting out of active participation.
- Organize group membership so that students are not regularly separated by nationality or language.
- Coach students on strategies for working together outside of class, collaborating with people from different backgrounds, and taking extra steps to clarify and confirm their understanding of each other.
- When group interactions and collaborative projects are part of the class, give students feedback on how well they are functioning in their groups, and ask for feedback from students on group processes.
- Articulate the value of diversity on campus, and discuss how working in diverse settings benefits all students and contributes to learning in the course.

By working to make the classroom a place for mutually beneficial, constructive interactions between international and domestic students, faculty may be making a significant difference for students who are currently reporting lower levels of belonging, social satisfaction, and feelings of being respected on campus.

*To learn about SERU, visit the Office of Assessment web site: http://www.uiowa.edu/assessment/seru*  
*To consult on questions about teaching, contact the Center for Teaching: teaching@uiowa.edu*