

AC 2008-378: AN EVALUATION OF INDIAN INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS' EXPECTATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

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An Evaluation of Indian International Graduate Students' Expectations and Experiences

Abstract

This research analyzes the expectations and experiences of international graduate students who study at American universities. More specifically, the aim of this study is to find the pre-set goals of international graduate students from India, who are currently pursuing degrees at the graduate level in the School of Engineering at the University of Bridgeport. Volunteers consisting of international graduate students from India pursuing the Master of Science (MS) in engineering (electrical, computer, mechanical, and technology management) at the University of Bridgeport, CT were surveyed. The survey highlights two broad areas: (1) areas in which student expectations do not match the facilities, resources or practices currently available, and (2) areas where opportunities exist for faculty and staff to meet reasonably held expectations. Based on our results, we make recommendations to address the identified imbalances between expectation and reality. Conclusions are based both on impressions gathered through conversations with students and on responses from anonymous student opinion surveys.

Introduction

Since the number of international students pursuing their education in America is increasing, it is important to understand what causes this increase. There are many variables that make up an analysis of this type. Student satisfaction is a key strategic variable in maintaining the flow of international students into American institutions of higher learning. The needs of international students are primarily: safety, high-tech laboratories, financial aid, library services, housing, health services, and cultural/sports facilities. Colleges must meet the needs created by increasing global competition, rising student expectations of quality, and service for the money spent.

During conversations with our students, we learned why they chose the United States and the University of Bridgeport for their graduate education. A first year student in the Computer Science and Engineering Department (C.S.) said:

“United States education system is very good. It is a flexible education system. 70% of students are coming to the United States for their study, and I am one of them. Also, I have relatives and friends in the United States to help me in the beginning...”

She also explained why she specifically chose the University of Bridgeport:

“...My relatives live in New England. This is one of the reasons for choosing The University of Bridgeport (UB). The other reason is UB offers courses related to network technology that I am interested in.”

Other students said:

“United States education system is considered as one of the best education systems in the world today. United States have advance technology. It has provided flexibility of subject.”

“...UB is providing good research work, and professors have good knowledge for particular subject. (First year student in the C.S.)”

“There are lots of things in life that are to be experienced. The most important thing is to experience a life in United States. Though most of them say it is for studies, it is not true. It is for the difference you feel apart from your home country. (First year student in Electrical Eng. (E.E.))”

“In my country, the importance is given to theoretical side rather than practical side. So, I think, USA is better compared in practical knowledge. (First year student in C.S.)”

“My educational consultant and my friends suggested this university. I went online and checked out the website. UB offered the courses that I was looking for and here I am. (First year student in C.S.)”

In conclusion, most Indian students are coming to the *United States* because of the flexible education system and practical knowledge. One of the main reasons for choosing UB is that the admission process is very fast and easy when compared to other universities. The other reason for students choosing UB is location. UB is very close to New York and New Jersey. Some of our students stay with their relatives who are living in these states. Most of these students use the train to come to UB everyday.

The University of Bridgeport is located fifty-five miles from New York City in Fairfield County, Connecticut. Bridgeport, Connecticut's largest city, borders the 50-acre campus to the north; Seaside Park and Long Island Sound, with some of the finest sandy beaches between New York and Cape Cod, mark the southern boundary. The unique location of the campus offers a variety of advantages to the University community.³

Survey

Fifty volunteers consisting of international Indian graduate students answered our informal questionnaire in the School of Engineering. We asked the students to mark the following topics in the order of importance: housing, library, campus jobs, cultural activities, sport activities, health services, campus placements, financial aid, language problems, safety, and other. We wanted them to write their expectations and experiences related to these topics. In addition, they graded their experiences in the United States and at UB.

Our results show that there is a discrepancy between the expectations of new students and the resources available at the University: 100% of students expect a safe and secure environment, both on and off campus; 100% of the students think the University should provide more on-campus job opportunities; 75% want campus school placement in a job following graduation; 70% think health insurance is important; 65% want a greater variety of books in the library; 60% think financial aid is important. The importance of cultural and sports activities as well as issues relating to difficulties with English as the major language is found in less than 30% of the responses. Overall, 90% of the students graded their American-University-experiences as good.

Safety

UB earned the Jeanne Clery Campus Safety Award in 2003. The “Jeanne Clery Campus Safety Award” established in 1994, is given each year by Howard&Connie Clery to honor schools and individuals that have done extraordinary things to make college and university students safer. The award is named in memory of the Clerys’ daughter Jeanne who was murdered on campus in 1986. Recipients are selected each year by Howard and Connie Clery and awarded by Security On Campus, Inc. ⁴

Although University of Bridgeport has a campus safety award, some of our students worry about their safety because of the off-campus environment.

“The environment of The University of Bridgeport is good, but the city of Bridgeport’s crime rate is high. So, I am little bit scared. (First year student in C.S.)”

“University campus is very safe. But, the campus is on the edge of the city. Because of this, safety is still an issue. There are lots of courses offered after 6pm. Night classes are not a good idea for our safety. (First year student in C.S.)”

“UB campus is very safe. But, I live off-campus. The off-campus accommodation is not that safe compared to the on-campus. Off-campus environment is getting better everyday. We do not have any transportation problem. We have UB shuttle services till 12:00am. (Second year student in E.E.)”

I feel safe inside the campus; there is no question about it. Off campus, I don’t go in particular stores and streets. But downtown is safe. I feel secure even at night. (First year student in C.S.)”

So, safety is one of the main issues for our students. Most of them, especially those who live off-campus, do not prefer to take classes after 6:00 p.m.

Financial Aid, Campus Jobs, and Library Services

Studying at a U.S. institution is an expensive investment. For the 2005-2006 academic year, The College Board reported the following average annual tuition costs by type of institution² :

- Four-year, Public Institutions: \$5,491
- Four-year, Private Institutions: \$21,235

These costs represent the cost of studies alone; when lodging, personal expenses, transportation, and other expenses are taken into account, and The College Board suggests the following annual student budgets:

- Four-year, Public Institutions (commuter students): \$15,991
- Four-year, Public Institutions (state residents): \$15,566
- Four-year, Public Institutions (out-of-state students): \$23,239
- Four-year, Private Institutions (commuter students): \$32,070
- Four-year, Private Institutions (residents): \$31,916

All types of scholarships and financial aid for international students are highly competitive and require excellent academic records. The main types of financial assistance available for international students who want to study in the U.S. are: Personal Funds, Home Country Funds, Funding From College, Sports Scholarships, International Awards, Loans, Employment.

Home Country Funds are offered by local government, corporate, or foundation sources. These sources are not found in all countries. College funds may be offered by the institutions. If it is offered, financial aid is usually made up of a number of different types of assistance, including grants and scholarships and occasionally loans or part-time work programs. Sports Scholarships can be offered to gifted student athletes to play for the college team as a means of paying for their education. Very little aid exists through international awards, and it is usually earmarked for advanced graduate students. Loan programs are another financial aid type. Before taking a loan, students must be aware of how a loan will affect their plans for the future. Current immigration regulations permit international students to work only part-time — up to 20 hours per week — and only on campus during their first year of study. By working 10 to 15 hours a week, students could earn enough to pay for incidentals such as books, clothing, and personal expenses. This type of work includes working at the university's cafeteria, bookstore, library, health club, or within the university's administrative offices¹.

The University of Bridgeport is a private institution. The School of Engineering is the largest graduate engineering program in Connecticut (over 1300 graduate students) and one of the three largest engineering programs in New England. We are home to the fastest growing Electrical Engineering Graduate Program in the country. Enrollment has tripled over the last few years (currently, a total of 470 students). UB hosts the largest Technology Management Program in the nation (over 300 students).

The University of Bridgeport has partnered with CPEP (Connecticut Pre-Engineering Program) for many years. Most recently, UB has offered 50 scholarships, at a total of \$2.4 million, to qualified CPEP students. CPEP is a non-profit organization that helps minority middle and high school students pursue careers in the science, technology, engineering and math.

Most of our new students do not expect to have financial aid and campus jobs for their first semester. After that they may apply for a Graduate Assistantship (GA), Teaching Assistantship (TA), or Research Assistantship (RA) position if their GPA is high enough.

All the Indian International students expect good library services since most of the international students are coming to the U.S. without any books or computers. They think it is very difficult to buy textbooks and books for them because of the cost. Therefore, the library must provide a wide variety of books.

“Library does not allow us to borrow books since it does not have enough. We can only read them in the library. Recently, they offer electronic books and journals through the ebrary database. I find these online services very useful. (Second year student in E.E.)”

“...if you can open the library 24 hours, it will be of great help... (First year student in C.S.)”

The Wahlstrom Library in UB is one of the first 5 libraries in the world to go live with the Ex Libris Primo® discovery solution, or the Library's **Eureka!** searching interface. It provides electronic books and journal articles to students online.



The School of Engineering in UB has eight state-of-the-art computer/instruction labs (20-25 Stations/Lab) in addition to the 12 research labs and centers.

Student Health Services

The University of Bridgeport Student Health Services offers high quality, outpatient ambulatory care for the treatment of acute illnesses and injuries. Serious medical problems are referred to the local hospital emergency room. Three part-time licensed physicians and two full-time registered nurses staff the Health Center.

Health Services' emphasis is geared towards wellness. We offer health education, preventive health screening, health promotion programs and immunizations. Students' individual needs are attended to in a confidential and caring manner.

“The care which is taken by health services is tremendous. They treat each student with a lot of care and love. (Second semester student in E.E.)”

“The people are doing a good services and mainly the dental department are doing a good job. (Second semester student in E.E.)”

All of our Indian International students think that UB provides excellent health services. Their expectations and experiences are met by Student Health Services.

Cultural/sports activities

Cultural events at the University of Bridgeport offer entertainment of high quality. Art exhibits, theatre productions, dance ensembles, classic cinema, lectures and concerts by UB groups, including the Jazz Ensemble are regularly scheduled. Special programs in the fine arts bring distinguished visitors to campus each year. Many of the artists spend days in residence giving classes and lecture-demonstrations prior to their performances. Student organizations of the University plan a wide range of social programs from the weekly movies to mixers, rock concerts, international festivals, lectures and comedy acts.

The University's schedule of events in the fine and performing arts is complemented by its location in the center of Fairfield County, one of the country's most desirable recreational and cultural areas. The University of Bridgeport offers a wide range of opportunities for students to learn about other cultures and to understand the American culture. Students from 60 countries attend the University. Through formal events such as the annual International Festival and The World Scope Series sponsored by the Office of International Affairs and the International Relations Club, and through informal contacts in and out of class, students from different cultures are able to meet and get to know one another.

At the University of Bridgeport, student involvement and leadership in extracurricular activities is encouraged and celebrated. The Office for Campus Activities and Community Services serves to advise and assist students with their programming efforts, provides new student orientation programming, and coordinates local volunteer and community service opportunities for students.

Over 40 registered clubs and organizations exist to provide students with numerous opportunities to participate in social, educational and cultural activities. The Office also publishes weekly and monthly activity calendars to keep the campus community updated on student events⁵.



“The International student centre is an active department at UB which frequently organizes festivals, programs, and international festival where students from different parts of world perform with an active spirit and enthusiasm. (Second semester Student in E.E.)”

“I like all cultural activities at UB like international festivals and Bollywood night. We have good equipment for sports in UB. But we do not have physical director to encourage us... (Second semester student in E.E.)”

“UB provide good cultural activities like international festivals, Bollywood nights. I do not have any idea about sports activities. (Second year student in E.E.)”

Conclusion

Responses reveal that quality education and laboratories with cutting edge technology are the most important things on a student’s mind. The results of the questionnaire also demonstrate a strong desire for security on campus and on-campus housing, campus placement and jobs, and a good library. The perception is that jobs, such as graduate assistant, research assistant, and teaching assistant, are defined by communication and interaction with other students and (most importantly) professors, with the ultimate result being for the student job holder to learn more and become more academically mature. Academically, students prefer a flexible study environment: for example, take-home exams instead of in-class exams. Furthermore, our research shows the international graduate students in engineering find social, cultural, and sports activities less important. However when sports activities are considered, students want the university to provide the resources for students to watch or participate in the students’ own national game(s), such as cricket, and not just the usual football or basketball. In addition, students would like to see their national foods sold on campus.

Although international Indian graduate students in engineering at UB graded their American-University-experiences as good, there is always room for improvement. Jobs

must be the most important factor since a good job is often perceived as the reward of a good education. Failure to get a good job or failure to get any job in a timely fashion following graduation would be a strong indicator to the student of the implied poor quality of their education, even in cases where the substance and quality of the education can be proven to be very good by independent means. Perception forms the proof to the student who has invested such a large degree of their money and time in this effort only to see no useful product result.

A corollary to the issue of finding jobs after graduation is the need to find on-campus jobs or off-campus job during the student's education process. Working during their education can benefit the student in at least 3 ways: (1) it can reinforce the perception of the quality of their education; they can pay their own bills with the money they earn; (2) it can make the transition easier to a "real:" job following graduation; (3) it can force them to keep their grades high and their classroom experiences strong, since poor grades are used to exclude students who seek jobs during their education.

There is one more benefit to streaming students in to jobs before and after their graduation. Since the students are international, it gives them a first-hand experience with the issues of immigration and out-sourcing facing many companies in America today. A person born in the United States can approach these topics with one learned point of view. Americans with an open mind can see the possibility of integrating the American job market in to the Global economy. International students in America already have a global picture of the economic system. They can answer the issues of immigration and out-sourcing in a more practical and pro-active manner.

Other issues, such as native games and food and similar cultural events are important but secondary needs of the International student. If a particular country is well represented on the college campus (for example India) and if its students have jobs before or after graduation, they can often apply financial pressure to the College to press for cultural events, sports, food, etc. that they might desire. At our University, not only are there many more cultural things of an Indian flavor, but also there are many restaurants and markets in the area that cater to the needs of a person from India, and this is in no small way due to the strong representation of the Indian community in economic and academic affairs.

References

¹ <http://www.educationusa.state.gov/finaid.htm>.

² Trends in Higher Education Series, Trends in *College Pricing*, The College Board 2005.

³ <http://www.bridgeport.edu/pages/3231.asp>, 02/26/2008.

⁴ <http://www.securityoncampus.org/aboutsoc/cleryaward/index.html>, 02/26/2008.

⁵ <http://www.bridgeport.edu/pages/3256.asp>, 02/26/2008.

Bibliography

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