

Attracting and Supporting International Graduate Students in Higher Education and Student Affairs

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Abstract

American higher education increasingly enrolls international students, yet little is known about the specific experiences of international students in the Higher Education and Student Affairs (HESA) field. Most HESA programs' curricula are American-centric and include integrated work experiences, which can present unique challenges for international students. The authors are international HESA students in Massachusetts. In fall 2018, they conducted the first national survey examining how international HESA students experience the graduate school search, employment, and transition processes. The survey instrument contained quantitative and qualitative items. Distribution occurred through social media and by email to over 120 HESA programs nationally. Respondents (N = 33) represented 20 home countries, and HESA graduate programs across the United States. Findings indicate that these students' academic, sociocultural, and legal needs differ in nuanced ways both from domestic HESA students and from other international graduate students, and are often unmet. This paper explores these nuances, including variation by institutional type and region, and the respective roles of various stakeholders in providing effective support. These insights are pertinent to HESA faculty internationalizing their programs, administrators supervising international students in HESA work, and offices serving international students at large.

Introduction

Over the last several decades, international students have increasingly pursued degree programs at American colleges and universities. Accordingly, higher education administrators and student affairs professionals have been faced with determining and serving these students' distinct needs. Scholarly work has been generated regarding international undergraduate and graduate students' decisions to study in the United States, as well as the challenges they face during their transitions to campus life in America (Kuo, 2011; Lee & Opio, 2011; Lee & Rice, 2007; Mori, 2000; Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010). Additionally, significant scholarship describes the processes by which (primarily domestic) students find out about, apply to, and ultimately choose to attend graduate programs in higher education and student affairs (HESA) (Dam, 2014; Mertz, Eckman, & Strayhorn, 2012; Poock & Love, 2001). Despite these two distinct areas of scholarship, little research has considered how international graduate students fare within the HESA field itself.

The HESA field and professional identity are uniquely American phenomena. As such,

most HESA programs' curricula are American-centric, focusing on the history and current issues of American higher education and preparing students to assume professional positions at American institutions. These features of HESA graduate programs can present academic and sociocultural challenges for international students. To provide financial support and professional experience(s), most HESA programs also include integrated work experiences (such as graduate assistantships, internships, or practica). Research indicates that the variety and financial support of available graduate-level professional positions is the primary factor driving domestic students' applications to and selection of a HESA graduate program (Dam, 2014; Mertz, Eckman, & Strayhorn, 2012). This is particularly true for students interested in pursuing a full-time track, which is required of international students in order to obtain a student visa (Poock & Love, 2001). However, the ways in which these professional positions are structured can also constitute a legal challenge for international HESA students to navigate.

The authors of this paper are presently international HESA graduate students in Massachusetts. In fall 2018, they conducted the first national survey examining how international students experience the HESA graduate school search, employment, and transition processes. The University of Massachusetts, Amherst's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the study.

This paper aims to illuminate the experiences of a population not often represented in literature or public discourse and, through doing so, offer concrete recommendations to faculty and administrators affiliated with HESA graduate programs on how to best support international students. The results of this study include particular discussion of variation by institutional type and region, and the respective roles of various stakeholders in providing effective support to international HESA students. These insights are pertinent to HESA faculty seeking to internationalize their programs, to administrators supervising international graduate students in HESA work, and to offices serving international students at large.

Methods

The authors developed the assessment instrument in September 2018, using Google Forms to facilitate collaboration across institutions. The instrument was a survey, containing both quantitative and qualitative items. Eligibility criteria were: age (18 years or older), program of study [current or recently graduated (last five years) HESA students at the master's or doctoral level], and international student status (dependent on an I-20 or visa document to study in the United States).

Prior to accessing the survey questions, participants were required to read a consent form and agree to voluntarily participate. This "opt in" question was the only required question throughout the assessment. Due to the sensitive nature of the subject matter, all questions within the assessment itself were made optional; that is, respondents were able to submit the survey without answering any given question(s), if so desired.

The authors developed four qualitative items related to international HESA students' origins. These items captured data on international HESA students' home country or countries, first language(s), country of undergraduate education, and means of learning about the HESA field and American graduate programs. The authors also developed three multiple-choice items related to international HESA students' choices. These captured data on the institutional type and geographic region of respondents' graduate programs, as well as on the types of

employment (if any) respondents held while enrolled in their HESA graduate program. To avoid identifying respondents' institutions directly, the geographic regions listed were drawn from the National Association of Students Personnel Administrators (NASPA): Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education regional map (NASPA, 2018). One qualitative question in this section provided space for respondents to elaborate on their experiences obtaining employment as an international HESA student. One additional multiple-choice item in this section was drawn from the Comprehensive International Student Needs Assessment and concerned respondents' primary reason for choosing their graduate program in particular (Berkeley International Office, 2011).

The following section of the assessment addressed international HESA students' transitions in three domains: academic, sociocultural, and legal. A multiple-choice question posed how long respondents had been studying in their graduate program. The questions in this section were formatted in a matrix, where respondents indicated their level of agreement with a series of statements on a four-point Likert-type scale from "agree" to "disagree", with no neutral option. A "not applicable" option was also provided for each statement. These questions and statements were drawn from the Comprehensive International Student Needs Assessment (Berkeley International Office, 2011). This assessment sought to determine the needs of undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in various programs of study at the University of California, Berkeley; many questions addressed both undergraduate and graduate students' needs, with some questions geared specifically towards undergraduate students alone or towards graduate students alone. No questions geared towards undergraduate students alone were included in the present study. The language used in select items was adapted minimally to suit the HESA field. The authors also developed one question in this section, which was a matrix-style question that examined the relative helpfulness of various sources of support in students' transitions to graduate studies in the United States.

The survey closed with three qualitative questions created by the authors. These allowed respondents to express one or more specific ways in which their graduate school program or institution made their journey easier or more difficult, advice they would give to a prospective international HESA graduate student, and any additional comments to help the authors better understand their experiences as an international HESA graduate student.

Distribution occurred online through two primary channels: Facebook and email. The authors shared the survey in four large Facebook groups, two of which were general groups related to the HESA field and two of which specifically focused on issues related to the internationalization of HESA and on international students in the field. The authors also compiled contact information for HESA faculty and student associations at over 120 institutions across the country and emailed them the survey with a request to forward it to any current or recent former international students affiliated with their programs. Respondents' qualitative comments were extracted directly from their survey responses and remain unaltered.

Participants

The survey yielded 33 responses (N = 33), with respondents representing 20 home countries. The home countries most frequently represented in this sample are China and South Korea (N = 4 for each), followed by Canada, Jamaica, and Mexico (N = 3 for each). This represents a departure from the combined undergraduate and graduate international student

population, where students from China and India are the most highly represented, followed by students from South Korea and Saudi Arabia (Institute of International Education, 2018). Within the sample as a whole, 36% of respondents (N = 12) consider English to be their first language and 58% (N = 19) obtained their undergraduate degrees in the United States.

Respondents attended HESA graduate programs at institutions large and small, public and private, and located in every NASPA-defined region of the United States. Notably, 73% of respondents (N = 24) attended public institutions. The nine respondents that attended private institutions were divided nearly equally between attending research universities (N = 5) and liberal arts colleges (N = 4). The NASPA region attracting the largest proportion of international students in this sample is by far Region 3 (N = 12), encompassing eleven states from Virginia in the Northeast to Texas in the Southwest. This could be due to the size of the region, the prominence of public universities within this region, or the region's climate, which may be relatively familiar and desirable to most international students.

Results

Findings indicate that these students' paths into HESA resemble those of domestic students. The respondents revealed that their top three sources of information about HESA programs included (1) mentors in college, (2) online research, and (3) study abroad advisors and fairs. The predominant reasons respondents chose to attend their specific graduate programs were (1) availability of a competitive funding package, (2) academic quality, and (3) geographic location. The results of this survey also illuminate the nuanced ways in which international HESA students' academic, sociocultural, and legal needs differ both from domestic HESA students and from international graduate students in other programs of study and are often unmet.

Academic

The results of academic-related questions indicate that well over half the respondents (60%) consider it challenging to relate to American students in class. Among these respondents, some attributed such struggles to their lack of knowledge and experience in an American context of higher education. For instance, one respondent stated that "... there were so many new concepts in lectures that made it difficult to understand lectures..." Another respondent pointed out that "... almost all of class discussions were held under the assumption that everyone in the room has been a part of the institutional culture for years." This respondent then added "that made me feel excluded from lot of class conversations." Still others attributed such struggles to the fact that most HESA graduate programs in the U.S. focused solely on the American context. For example, one respondent indicated that "U.S. higher education and student affairs program is too concentrated on domestic issues (U.S. issues), so the perspectives and the courses with [sic] related to international context is necessary to be expanded." This is echoed by another respondent who commented "American context based always" when asked about what had made their experience as international HESA graduate student in the U.S. more difficult. In addition to experiencing difficulty in relating to their American counterparts, approximately half of the respondents also ranked their difficulties in keeping up with reading assignments (52%) and with writing assignments (48%) as two other

major academic challenges. In fact, one respondent argued that to assign the same workload to international and domestic students was unfair, stating "... it takes me twice as much time to complete them to get prepared for classes, which demotivates me greatly." These students' struggle with English language calls into question the current practice of using standardized English proficiency tests, such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and International English Language Testing System (IELTS), as the only indicator of international students' linguistic preparedness. Furthermore, it also urges HESA faculty members to meet their students where they are in classes comprised of both domestic and international graduate students. For example, instructors' flexibility with assignment deadlines can reduce international graduate students' anxiety over completing assignments in an additional language. In addition, regular one-on-one check-ins with international graduate students provides an opportunity for faculty members to keep track of their progress.

Our respondents were also asked to speak about what made their experiences in their programs positive. A recurring theme that emerged from their positive experiences focuses on an international-inclusive curriculum. One respondent mentioned "an internationalized syllabus" as beneficial to their study in the program. Another respondent echoed the theme by attributing their positive experience to a flexible curriculum design which allowed them to take classes from the international education program. This respondent further explained:

I was able to take advantage of the courses offered for international ed[ucation] program and created my own specialization, which is extremely helpful because I was able to connect with other international students in other graduate programs.

Sociocultural

The results of the sociocultural-related questions reveal that 70% of the respondents found it hard to balance schoolwork and free time. Over half of the respondents (60%) expressed concerns about being discriminated against by Americans. Two other major sociocultural challenges for international students include communication, such as concerns regarding the ability to be understood linguistically (54%), and coping with homesickness (54%). One respondent mentioned experiencing difficulty in being understood, stating "[m]y graduate advisor does not seem to understand my struggle, and it was hard because I felt like I was on my own at times". Another respondent further shed light on their concern over tackling homesickness, referring to their graduate program as "not providing us with enough emotional support". Nevertheless, when asked about their positive experiences in their graduate programs, several respondents stressed the importance of a support system and having people who share similar experiences. One respondent pointed out:

I believe I had a unique experience during grad school as all my supervisors during my time there were either people of color and/or was once an international student themselves, so they understood my struggles, worked with me, advised and counseled me. Overall, they were very beneficial to my studies as they made up part of my support system during my time there, guided me when I needed assistance.

Another response echoed the importance of having friends who share similar experiences by

pointing out "...it was much easier for me to make friends with other international students..." Yet another response echoed the importance of a support system in their success:

I think having a cohort model in our program has been instrumental to my success on a personal as well as professional level. We were able to challenge and support each other in ways that I don't think it would have been possible if we weren't in all of this together.

Legal

The legal aspects of being an international HESA student were of significant concern to many respondents. The source of greatest concern (indicated by 82% of respondents) was understanding U.S. medical insurance and services. Seventy-nine percent of respondents were concerned about securing a job in the U.S. after graduation, as well as about having adequate financial support. Other significant sources of concern for respondents were understanding their U.S. tax obligations (76%) and finding on-campus employment (73%). The qualitative responses overwhelmingly addressed legal concerns related to employment and reflected experiences that occurred during graduate school enrollment as well as while searching for and (for some) obtaining post-graduate positions.

The single greatest challenge respondents expressed regarding their legal transitions concerned others' knowledge of visa requirements. Respondents were frustrated that faculty had a "lack of general knowledge about visas" and "not much familiar[ity] with the U.S. policy." One respondent in particular described being frustrated with faculty who "weren't aware" that the program's requirement for students to simultaneously hold a graduate assistantship and an internship meant international students had to apply for Curricular Practical Training, a form of work authorization that enables students on F-1 visas to pursue paid or unpaid work off-campus (otherwise prohibited) if required for an academic course. Many responses reflected feelings of isolation; students wrote that they felt "alone in the job search process" and "like [their] graduate advisor didn't particularly understand [their] struggle, especially related to employment." One respondent, however, described the reverse: "several faculty/advisors work in international education and can speak to the specifics of being an international student/looking for work in student affairs as an international student." Another comment underscored the importance of faculty and departmental support. These responses demonstrate the benefits that could result from reducing traditional disciplinary boundaries, such as by faculty connecting with international student advisors or by facilitating increased collaboration between higher education and international education programs.

Three themes emerged in examining the ways institutions alleviated international HESA students' legal challenges: (1) reducing financial barriers, (2) communicating clearly and often, and (3) being flexible. One respondent commended their institution for providing them the in-state tuition rate and for reimbursing the fees associated with applying for their work visa; others praised their institutions for providing full funding and significantly reducing financial barriers. Many respondents bemoaned insufficient funding and the inability to pursue additional, off-campus employment. International student services offices were recognized for "always answer[ing] [students'] question[s] in a timely manner" and for offering "constant reminder[s] of what to do (visa-related paperwork, tax, housing, and so on)." As international students' work

eligibility is dependent on satisfying visa regulations, flexibility is a necessary component of hiring and supervising an international HESA student-employee. Due to paperwork not being completed in time, one respondent “had to skip the first few days of training for [their] graduate assistantship, which only made [them] feel more isolated.” Another respondent commented that a “flexible start for [their] Graduate Assistant position” was helpful when they were told they “could not start working until August 1.”

Resources for Support

Respondents’ qualitative comments regarding the support they received from faculty members, assistantship supervisors, international student services offices, and peers varied greatly. On a scale from 1 (most helpful) to 5 (least helpful), supervisors were rated the most helpful with a mean score of 2.4, followed by faculty with a mean score of 2.6. International student services offices were rated the least favorably, with a mean score of 3.4. Fellow international students and domestic students each received a mean score of 3.3. Many respondents indicated, through qualitative responses, that they were the only international student in their cohort, if not their program. The survey instrument did not measure whether respondents were connected with international students in other programs at their institution, or with other international HESA students at other institutions.

Discussion

It is worth noting that over half of the present sample (58%) completed their undergraduate degrees in the United States. Thus, it is not surprising that these students’ paths into the field resemble those of domestic students, particularly when these paths have their roots in undergraduate student involvement, leadership, and interactions with student affairs professionals. Even some individuals who did not obtain their undergraduate degrees at American institutions expressed that they gained awareness of HESA as a potential career path through interactions with the American higher education system, such as through study abroad programming or through an advisor in their home country who had, at some point, studied or worked in American higher education. Others who did not interact with American higher education as undergraduate students were more likely to pursue full-time work in their home country while utilizing online tools to investigate their options for graduate study. Several respondents mentioned that programs which required in-person interviews (as opposed to interviews via phone or through software such as Skype) were considered inaccessible due to the high cost of travel.

Despite the resemblance, it is also worth noting how international and domestic students’ sources of information about student affairs as a potential field of study and career differ. This study indicated that (1) mentors in college, (2) online research, and (3) study abroad advisors and fairs comprise the major sources of information for international students. This result departs from Taub and McEwen’s (2006) study where the authors surveyed 300 then-enrolled domestic students in 24 master’s programs in HESA-related fields and concluded (1) interaction with student affairs professionals, (2) involvement in student activities, and (3) reading a graduate school catalog, as the most frequently employed sources of information on a career in HESA. This difference can be attributed to the lack of knowledge or awareness of

student affairs as a profession and field of study outside of the U.S. Thus, international students who completed their undergraduate study outside of the U.S. are rarely exposed to the possibility of assuming a career as a student affairs professional. Their sources of information about student affairs thus largely come from mentors, or study abroad advisors who might have experiences studying in the U.S. or are aware of this profession.

That the primary factor affecting international HESA students' program choice was the availability of a competitive funding package is unsurprising, yet significant. One common reason institution seeks to enroll international students is their perceived ability to pay, as they are not eligible for federal financial aid. However, in a field marked by fully-funded master's programs and low entry-level salaries, prospective international HESA graduate students are emphasizing the importance of price. Academic quality and geographic location were also rated as important in prospective students' decision-making, yet the criteria used to determine favorability remain unclear. Do prospective international HESA students rely on institutional or program rankings to determine academic quality, or are the contributions of specific faculty members more important? When prioritizing geographic location, does this population tend to prefer urban, suburban, or rural locations, and do they gravitate towards any region in particular?

Institutions seeking to internationalize their HESA programs would therefore benefit from engaging with involved international undergraduate students on their campus or in their region, or those who have participated in study abroad programming through their institution. It would also behoove institutions to maintain an active and up-to-date online presence.

Academic

Two major academic issues confronting international students emerged from this study. First, international students in our study indicated a struggle with an American-centric curriculum which placed a major focus on the American higher education system with little reference to contexts outside of the U.S. As our results indicate, many international HESA graduate students - especially those who completed their undergraduate study outside of the U.S. - have found it challenging to grasp ideas and concepts in class and contribute to discussions with their American counterparts due to their limited knowledge of American higher education. Additionally, the profession of student affairs, an integral component of American higher education institutions, remains a very under-researched field outside of the U.S. In many national contexts, student affairs do not even exist as a field of study. This also explains why many international students in HESA programs experience difficulty relating to the experiences of their American peers.

Secondly, speaking English as a foreign language also posed a great challenge for international students academically. Many respondents pointed out that it took them twice the time of their domestic counterparts to complete the same amount of work. This suggests a need for HESA programs and faculty members to pay attention to international students' needs and struggles, particularly with regard to their reading and writing speed. For example, it is a common practice for many instructors to hand out short readings in class and ask students to read them within 10 minutes before the class reconvenes to discuss. This practice causes tremendous anxiety for international students who speak English as a second or foreign language because they might read at a much slower pace and thus cannot keep up with the rest

of the class given such little time to read.

In conclusion, it is imperative that HESA programs and faculty members be aware of their assumptions about what students know and propose a flexible course design that accommodates students with different levels of background knowledge, and reading and writing speed.

Sociocultural

Our study revealed that international students' concerns over the sociocultural aspect of their pursuit of study in an American HESA program included striking a balance between personal life and work, encountering discrimination in the U.S., communication, and dealing with homesickness. The struggle for a work-life balance for student affairs professionals and graduate students in student affairs has been well discussed in literature (Stimpson & Filer, 2011). The result of our study is consistent with the literature and reiterates that international students are not exempt from such struggles. With regard to international students' concern over discrimination, our finding echoes Lee and Rice's (2007) study, which found that international students, at both undergraduate and graduate levels attending an institution located in the southwestern U.S. experienced different types of discrimination ranging from cultural to verbal discrimination. This study also reveals that the sources of discrimination include peers, faculty members, and the local community. In addition, numerous respondents also pointed out that they were the only international students in their programs, a fact that further isolated them academically and socioculturally.

Legal

The results of this study demonstrate that international HESA students are highly concerned about finding and maintaining employment while enrolled in graduate programs. This is particularly notable given that most HESA programs require students to pursue at least one applied experience (such as a graduate assistantship, internship, or practicum), which is not the case in many other fields. It is clear that international HESA students appreciate the opportunity to obtain financial support and gain practical experience; however, this is also a significant source of stress due to faculty and supervisors' lack of knowledge around visa requirements and limitations. For example, residence life offices commonly require graduate assistants to begin work in July; however, international students cannot be admitted into the U.S. on their student visas more than 30 days prior to their program start date (University of Chicago, 2018). Supervisors' awareness and accommodation of such nuances are greatly appreciated. International HESA students would be well-served by a collaborative effort by faculty, supervisors, and international student services offices to foresee these issues and proactively develop solutions. Respondents expressed gratitude for faculty and supervisors who were supportive and understanding of their circumstances.

Quantitative and qualitative data from this study also make evident that international HESA students are highly concerned about obtaining post-graduation employment, whether in the U.S. or abroad. HESA is a uniquely American field, both in curriculum and in the structure and availability of professional opportunities. Many respondents described fears about finding employment in the U.S., given that "student affairs skills are not considered 'special,'" and "getting a job after graduation is extremely difficult." If not finding employment in the U.S.,

international graduates of other programs will generally be able to transfer their knowledge and skills to their home country's context. However, given that HESA work is much more prevalent in the U.S. than in most other countries globally, this can be challenging, prompting questions of certainty and value. One respondent asserted "you have to be sure this is what you want to do, because employment is tricky, and you may not have opportunities to work in this field in your home country."

Interestingly, the statement that the highest number of respondents rated as a source of concern - U.S. medical insurance and services - was not addressed in the qualitative responses. However, interpreted in light of the fact that 58% of respondents attended a U.S. institution for their undergraduate education, the fact that this is still a prominent concern is problematic.

Resources for Support

Although individual student relationships with faculty, supervisors, international student services offices, and peers tended towards extremes, the trends are fairly moderate. Faculty and supervisors were generally rated as more helpful in supporting international HESA students than were international student services offices, domestic peers, and even fellow international students. This could be because (1) students spend the most time with their faculty members and supervisors, and thus develop overall stronger relationships with them; (2) international student services offices on some campuses were perceived to focus on immigration compliance rather than student support; and (3) many students report being the only international student in their cohort or program, thus limiting the helpfulness of fellow international peers.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study examined the experiences of international HESA graduate students, a relatively small population who are not well-represented in literature or discussion nor well-connected to one another. It remains to be determined whether the sample of 33 individuals is representative of the larger group's demographic backgrounds, academic and sociocultural experiences, and employment outcomes. Future research in this area should aim to recruit a larger and broader sample, including those who attended HESA graduate programs at private institutions and/or in the Rocky Mountain and Mid-Atlantic regions.

One of the main methods of participant recruitment in this study relied on faculty members sharing the survey link with current or former international students in their programs. Some faculty responded that they had only enrolled one or few international student many years ago or that they did not have current contact information for their international alumni. This could be due to changes in program leadership, or indicate that faculty (and perhaps even alumni relations offices) should be maintaining stronger relationships with former international students. In addition to contacting faculty, future researchers should consider reaching out to institutions' international student services or alumni relations offices.

Finally, some of the qualitative data entered into the survey instrument was unclear or did not directly answer the questions posed. Even in collecting quantitative data, the assessment instrument was not always sensitive enough. For example, learning that prospective international students value an institution's geographic location does not reveal

which factors about a location (urban vs. rural, North vs. South, climate preferences, and so on) make it more or less appealing. Having the opportunity to clarify responses and probe details would yield a richer picture of this population. For this reason, future researchers should consider conducting interviews with eligible participants. In-person, video, and phone interview formats should be considered to reach eligible participants located around the globe.

Conclusion

This study yielded new insights into the experiences of international HESA students, particularly regarding their graduate school search process and their academic, sociocultural, and legal transitions. In evaluating offers of admission, international HESA students value competitive funding packages, academic quality, and geographic location. Once enrolled, students' experiences tend to be more positive when faculty, supervisors, and international student services offices work together to provide collaborative support. It is critical that faculty recognize and honor international students' perspectives in the classroom, particularly given that HESA curricula are largely American-centric. Practicing cultural competence is also key to helping international students succeed both in the classroom and in the workplace. The practical requirements of HESA programs can present nuanced challenges for international students, who are often responsible for explaining their employment eligibility to faculty and supervisors. Faculty and supervisors who demonstrate an understanding of, and empathy for, international HESA students' experiences are deeply appreciated. Future studies of this population should aim to capture richer, more comprehensive data from a wider sample.

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