Academic Achievement and Demographics of International Undergraduates

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ABSTRACT

Are international undergraduates whose native language is not English less prepared to succeed academically at an American four-year institution after transferring from an American community college than ones who are first-time freshmen (NFRS) or exchange visitors (EAPR)? This question’s answer was no at an American West Coast public university where five cohorts of international transfer undergraduates (TRAN) earned mean first-year grade point averages (GPA) between B- and B. Less than 12% of these students earned GPAs below C, and less than 15% were in bad academic standing (probation, subject to disqualification, or dismissed). In comparison, five parallel cohorts of NFRS and EAPR earned mean first-year GPAs averaging between B and B+ to A-. Less than 10% earned GPAs below C or were in bad academic standing. Thus, a minority of this university’s international undergraduates struggled academically regardless of whether they were TRAN, NFRS, or EAPR.

INTRODUCTION

Are international undergraduates whose native language is not English less prepared to succeed academically at an American university after transferring from an American community college than ones who are first-time freshmen (NFRS) or exchange visitors (EAPR)? This question has become increasingly important during recent years because progressively larger numbers of nonimmigrant international undergraduates have enrolled at American higher education institutions (Institute of International Education, 2014). Administrators potentially could maximize international undergraduates’ academic success at American universities by 1) implementing admissions criteria that select students who are prepared...
to succeed academically, 2) developing and implementing appropriate programs and/or services based upon data indicating the degree to which these students struggle academically, and 3) ensuring students persist to the next academic year and are retained at high rates through to graduation.

International undergraduates’ academic success has become an increasing concern at an American West Coast public university (hereafter referred to as “the University”) that is recognized nationally for its outstanding academics and research (U.S. News & World Report, 2014). The concern stems from generalizations by the University’s administrators, faculty, and staff that its international undergraduates collectively are struggling academically (term grade point averages [GPA] below 2.0 [C]) despite its historically strong support through a wide range of programs and services (e.g., academic and immigration advising, health services, one-on-one English tutoring, orientations, peer mentoring, psychological counseling, social and cultural events, transition program, writing center and programs, etc.; Fass-Holmes & Vaughn, 2014). These programs and services are intended to optimize the students’ academic and social integration, and to promote their retention and graduation (Tinto, 1975).

The above generalizations have two potentially serious drawbacks, however. First, they run the risk of producing feelings of discrimination (Glass & Braskamp, 2012; Hanassab, 2006; Lee & Rice, 2007) which, in turn, could undermine the University’s international undergraduate experience (Glass, Buus, & Braskamp, 2013). Second, these generalizations are not supported by data. Recent findings show that the overwhelming majority of the University’s international undergraduates has been succeeding academically while a smaller than expected percentage has been struggling (Fass-Holmes & Vaughn, 2014).

Evidence that the University’s international undergraduates collectively are succeeding academically (Fass-Holmes & Vaughn, 2014) has been met with skepticism. According to this skepticism, degree-seeking international transfer undergraduates (TRAN) who previously attended community colleges must be the students struggling academically. The stated explanation for why TRAN must be the academically struggling students is that community colleges inadequately prepare TRAN for the University’s academic rigor. If this skepticism is correct, it could have important implications for policies, programs, services, and admissions requirements related specifically to TRAN applicants.

In order to address the skepticism about evidence that TRAN were not collectively struggling (Fass-Holmes & Vaughn, 2014), this chapter’s study was conducted as an extension and a further exploration of academic achievement of the University’s international undergraduates. It analyzed several academic achievement indicators for the five most recent cohorts of the University’s TRAN and compared them with international first-time freshmen (NFRS; degree-seeking students who did not previously enroll at a higher education institution) and exchange visitors (EAPR; non-degree students who enrolled at the University for one academic year or less as part of their program of study at their home university) to determine more conclusively whether TRAN indeed were the University’s struggling international undergraduates. This study, to our knowledge, was the first multi-cohort comparison of academic achievement between TRAN, NFRS, and EAPR to be reported in the research literature (cf. Li, Chen, & Duanmu, 2010; Ren & Hagedorn, 2012).

The primary goal of this exploratory study was to test the hypothesis that if the University’s TRAN collectively struggled academically, then the following outcomes should be observed.

- TRAN should have low average term GPAs during their first year of study at the University.
- Large percentages of TRAN should have term GPAs below 2.0 (C) at the University.