



Managing Expectations: Adjustment Experiences of First-Year International Students 2013-14 Undergraduate Research Partnership Initiative Report

The Student Affairs Information and Research Office (SAIRO) is the research and assessment office within UCLA’s Student Affairs organization. The mission of SAIRO is to support the learning and development of the whole student by providing reliable, timely and useful information about students and their experiences; developing the capacity of student affairs and other stakeholders to collect, interpret, and utilize data to enhance the quality of students’ educational experience and environment; and by helping Student Affairs units assess and document the effectiveness of their programs and practices.

Student Affairs & Information Research Office
(310) 206-8470
sairo@saonet.ucla.edu

Executive Summary

The 2013-2014 Undergraduate Research Partnership Initiative (URPI) study explored the role of peer interaction in shaping the academic and social adjustment of first-year international students at UCLA. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 entering students during fall and winter quarters in which participants were asked to describe their perceptions of UCLA, peer interactions, friendship networks, and expectations for future peer interactions. Findings suggest that although most of the study sample had high expectations for interacting with domestic students, the majority described difficulties with such interaction. Some participants faced significant challenges in making friends with domestic students. Participants’ limited interaction with domestic students contributed to negative perceptions. Overall, there appeared to be a limit in the frequency and quality of domestic peer interactions among the students in the study sample, resulting in a much less rich experience than the students had anticipated. This report describes these peer interactions and challenges to friendship formation, as well as other adjustment experiences.

Background

The Undergraduate Research Partnership Initiative (URPI) is an ongoing research collaboration between Student Affairs Information and Research Office (SAIRO) researchers and current UCLA undergraduates. The purpose of URPI is to meaningfully engage UCLA students in the collection of institutional data and produce qualitative research on student experiences that will inform the work of Student Affairs practitioners and other campus stakeholders. Undergraduate

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Team Members

Disha Bhagwart*	Staff Members
Heidi Cheon*	Elvira Rodriguez (SAIRO)
Lei Feng*	Kristen McKinney (SAIRO)
Zhenxiong Han*	Amy Pojar (DCISS)
Archna Patel	Peer Facilitators
Christina Romo*	Faye Jin
Hoguer Sanchez*	Kaila Shivers
Tingxue Yu	
Changchang Zhang	
Jiwei Zhang	

*Withdrew from team during the year due to schedule conflict

participants gain valuable first-hand experience in designing a research study as well as collecting and analyzing qualitative data. The 2013-2014 URPI team consisted of 10 undergraduate researchers and two peer facilitators. The undergraduate researchers represented a range of student demographics, varying by major, race/ethnicity and international/domestic student status.

The 2013-2014 Undergraduate Research Partnership Initiative (URPI) study explored the role of peer interaction in shaping the academic and social adjustment of first-year international students at UCLA. International students represent one of the fastest growing student populations at UCLA and in American higher education institutions more broadly. Existing higher education research demonstrates that international student adjustment to US institutions can be complicated and that their interaction with domestic students can be limited. This study sought to better understand the role of peer interaction in adjustment by learning about how, when, and with whom first-year international students make friends. The longitudinal nature of the study allowed for an exploration of students' expectations for friendship formation, along with the challenges that arose for students trying to build domestic friendship networks. Specifically, the research questions addressed were:

1) What does the adjustment process look like for first-year international students and 2) What role do friendship networks play in this adjustment?

Methods

Semi-structured interviews with 20 participants were conducted at the start of fall and winter quarters. Fall quarter interviews were conducted by SAIRO researchers, the two peer facilitators, and the Special Projects Coordinator for the Dashew Center for International Students and Scholars. Members of the undergraduate research team conducted winter quarter interviews after completing a quarter of extensive training designed to enhance their understanding and ability to conduct qualitative research. Having undergraduates conduct interviews, some of whom are international students themselves, potentially allowed participants to express their views about the campus environment and experiences as an international student in ways they might not have expressed to a campus administrator.

In addition to undergoing qualitative methods training and conducting winter quarter interviews, members of the undergraduate research team also transcribed the fall quarter interviews of the individual who they eventually interviewed in winter. This aspect of the study design allowed team members to gain familiarity with their assigned participants' experiences and helped them prepare follow-up questions to ask during the winter quarter interviews. Thus, the transcription of the fall quarter interviews by the research team provided additional preparation for conducting winter quarter interviews.

Analysis of interview data began with analytic memos in which research team members reflected not only on the content of individual interviews, but also on the changes observed between fall and winter quarter for each participant. The team reviewed transcripts and collectively developed a coding schema that captured trends and themes across interviews that was used to code all transcripts. Researchers made a concerted effort to interview a diverse group of first-year international students, both in terms of academic major and nationality. Only students who had not previously studied or spent a significant amount of time in the United States were included in the final sample. All demographic information was self-reported. Names of participants

were removed from study transcripts and reports, as was any other potentially identifying information, to protect participants' privacy. **Table 1** displays participant demographics.

Findings

Six major theme areas emerged from our analysis including: 1) pre-college expectations and perceptions of challenges, 2) strategies for forming friendships, 3) challenges related to friend-making, 4) overall adjustment experiences, 5) resources, and 6) recommendations from participants. Given the focus on exploring the role of peer interactions in the adjustment of first-year international students, the findings highlight how and with whom students made friends.

I. Expectations and Perceptions of Challenges

This section focuses on the expectations and perceptions that first year UCLA international students had shortly after their arrival in the United States. Overall, international students had high expectations for interacting with domestic students and a contrasting limited desire to have co-national friends due to the perception that having only co-national friends results in a negative adjustment experience. Participants valued interaction with domestic students as a way to potentially learn U.S. language and culture. Although students acknowledged that language and culture can potentially pose a challenge to international students, many also believed that these challenges would not

apply to them and that they would have a high number of domestic friends. Ultimately, although some participants believed they would not be affected by challenges, evidence from their winter quarter interviews suggested that they were indeed encountering these challenges. There appeared to be a gap between their initial perceptions and their actual experiences, despite believing that they were exceptional and immune from such challenges.

Perceptions of the "average" international student

At the beginning of fall quarter, participants described international students as heavily reliant on co-nationals. They described the average international student as one who spends the majority of his or her time interacting with co-national students. For instance, one participant from India said in his interview, "I think international students generally tend to flock together from people of their own country... The average international student, I have to say, does not have a lot of American friends" (T126, P9-10, 36-5). To our participants, international students who mainly interacted with co-national students were often the ones who had failed to integrate into American society. One participant said, "I found [it] to be detrimental because it really ruins your experience, because [if] you start associating yourself as an outsider, it will stay with you for the rest of the four years" (T121, P3, 3-10). Almost all the participants expressed a desire to avoid having only co-national friends for fear that they might miss out on the opportunity to engage in American society and culture.

Table 1. Participant Demographics (N=20)

National Origin	Canada (1), China (5), Greece (1), Hong Kong (4), India (3), Iran (2), Malaysia (1), Mexico (1), Republic of Korea (1), Taiwan (1)
Gender	Female (9), Male (11)
Academic Major	Applied Mathematics (2), Biology (4), Chemistry (1), Computer Science (3), Economics (1), Engineering (4), English (1), Physics (1), Psychology (1), Undeclared (3)

demonstrated their extreme willingness to interact with domestic students. As one participant said, “when I did come here, I would say I had the bias in my head that if I’m coming here, I would want to have more of a varied friend group” (T205, P7, 12). Some participants expressed feeling pressured to stay away from their co-national friends. One student from India commented, “when I come here, I did not want to hang out with too many Indians all the time” (T205, P7, 27-43). Students’ desire to interact with domestic friends and to avoid associating exclusively with co-nationals was common in the first quarter.

Perceptions of challenges

The majority of participants acknowledged challenges associated with language and culture. In describing these challenges, participants expected that making friends with domestic students would help with these challenges by providing opportunities to practice the English language and learn American culture. While most participants acknowledged these challenges, there were some participants who did not think such challenges would make a difference in their adjustment experience. To these participants, *other* international students might run into the challenges identified above, but they themselves would not have the same problem. For instance, one participant explicitly said he would not feel any culture shock. He explained,

I was out of this culture shock because I’m not the only one who came from my family to America. I have an older sister who did the same thing and she kept me updated about these things. She told me her experiences. So, when I came here I was mentally prepared as to what to look out for and what not to look out for (T121, P3, 22-28).

However, in his winter quarter interview he commented, “I just think the American culture is very articulate. They express everything they feel in terms of words. It’s a very--especially if you meet a new person--it’s very wordy. We don’t just say everything you feel” (T221, P10, 39-3). Apparently, this “articulate” communication style in American culture is very different from the style that he was used to. In other words, the participant still

experienced culture shock even though he claimed the opposite in his initial interview. Other participants who denied that they would face challenges ultimately admitted experiencing some cultural differences as well. For example, one participant said,

Cause my culture is very different from their culture. And what I may find acceptable – what they may find acceptable may not be acceptable to me. And sometimes, I just have to stop expecting things basically from them and just be open-minded to what they believe in (T205, P3, 9-14).

Similarly, another participant articulated that “language, ethnicity, and nationality” were a barrier in his interactions with other students, and it was almost impossible to overcome them (T126, P14, 37-42). Ultimately, some participants thought that they were exceptional in that they would either be faced with minimal challenges in adjusting to life at UCLA or they would not face any difficulties at all.

One experience that had an influence on students’ perceptions of their exceptionalism was previous study abroad experience. For example, one student, who was originally from Iran and studied abroad for six years did not expect any challenges in his time here as an international student (T114, P2, 7-9). However, not all students with study abroad experience felt similarly. Another participant who had studied abroad for two years acknowledged potential academic challenges, stating, “Maybe ‘cause my first language is not English so maybe we’ll have difficulties in class... and school work might be more time consuming for us than local students... for me, I’m not a fast reader so I take a lot of time reading and doing work” (T115, P5, 14-18). Thus, while previous study abroad experiences mediated some students’ expectations, this was not a conclusive predictor of why many of the students in our study sample felt they would not experience challenges.

II. Strategies For Forming Friendships

Although most of the participants claimed to have a diverse friendship group, half of our participants had more international (primarily co-national) friends than domestic friends and only two had a balanced portion of both. Additionally, Asian international

students tended to have more Asian friends, and Caucasian friends were rare in most of the participants' friendship networks. Overall, the participants' friendship networks did not change much from fall quarter to winter quarter. What follows is an overview of the strategies students used to make friends.

Institutional opportunities related to friendship formation

Institutional opportunities are defined as opportunities that every UCLA student generally has and were found to be important to first-year international students' friend-making. Attending New Student Orientation, being in the same class with someone, and living close to someone (e.g. in the residence halls) provided a structured opportunity for new students to meet peers. As one participant mentioned,

Those are my first friends, so I—during orientation, my orientation group, that becomes important because you were with them almost throughout the day. You do a lot of stuff together. So they tend to become your first friends. Now, of course, my roommates, my neighbors, are good friends (T126, P5, 15-19).

Being roommates with someone helped with friendship formation. One participant who became good friends with his roommates said, "My roommates are awesome. They're pretty supportive. I was sick so they take a little care of me. They checked up on me regularly. They're pretty supportive of me, so ya, I got some good friends here" (T105, P13, 21-23).

Individual strategies related to friendship formation

In addition to the institutional opportunities, international students also used different individual strategies to make friends on their own. One common friend-making strategy was actively making oneself available to others. For example, one participant described knocking on the doors of others in his residence hall as a way of meeting new people (T115, P2, 20-21). Another participant said he gave out chocolates to encourage more people to visit him (T102, P4, 28-29). Participants commented on the importance allowing oneself to be vulnerable during the friend-making process. One participant noted,

Everybody is shy to talk at first. So if one or the other breaks the ice, then it becomes normal. So you talk to one person once, and then you can always when you see them next just say hi. That's all that's required to start the conversation...it might seem random or out of the blue that why would someone just say hello to me, because I don't know. So yeah, but once that barrier has been crossed, everything is just normal (T226, P8-9, 31-2).

Other individual friend-making strategies included meeting people through mutual friends, pursuing topics in daily conversation that would specifically be of interest to domestic students, and forming study groups. An additional way of making friends was through joining different student organizations. One participant reported, "I got really close with some people in my fraternity... and I met a lot of people I wouldn't have met otherwise...I think that's where my main group of friends are right now" (T204, P1, 17-22). It is important to note that even though most participants said that participating in student activities would help them make more friends, only five participants had really taken the action of joining a student organization. Challenges related to forming meaningful connections with peers are described in subsequent sections and may shed light on why students did not always actualize their plans to participate in student groups.

Participants used different strategies to become friends with co-national and domestic students. They more actively sought friendship with domestic students. For instance, one participant reported that, "usually in class, I will sit [next] to a domestic student and that way you talk to them more and there are more chances of you guys being friends" (T215, P4, 6-8). Another said,

I have to say that I do make an effort to make new [domestic] friends wherever I go. I mean it's definitely an active effort on my part. So I do try to talk to more people. Not to the point where I'm over doing it or anything, but if it feels right, or if it's fine, like both of us are doing nothing right now so maybe just going to talk to them. So in those cases, yeah I do make a conscious effort" (T226, P8, 20-25).

It seemed easier for participants to become friends

with co-nationals than domestic students. One participant explained the reason for this as a “connection” between those who share the same nationality, which made it easier to be friends with them. She stated,

Right now, like I said, because of that special connection when you get introduced...oh “You’re from Taiwan too!” So right now, it’s...a part of that...forming new relationships is kind of affected by that... people tend to introduce you to people...who share the same nationalities as you. “Oh my other friend, she’s from Taiwan too maybe you can get to know each other”...things like that (T119, P6, 41-46).

Given their desires to have a rich American college experience, it is not surprising that our participants sought domestic friendships. The next section describes some of the challenges faced by participants in trying to do so.

III. Challenges Related to Friend-Making

Unfortunately, but perhaps not surprisingly given their high expectations, many of our participants experienced challenges in making friends. Specifically, these challenges related to language and cultural differences, which often occurred together, as well as the participants’ own perceptions of domestic students. A lack of familiarity with the language, including current slang terms, resulted in participants feeling disconnected from American culture and their peers.

Language and culture

Language and cultural challenges were the most common barriers to forming meaningful friendships with domestic peers. Even though some participants had figured out how to overcome such challenges, others were unable to do so. Language and cultural challenges are to be expected given that the participants have lived outside the United States for most of their lives. One participant from China mentioned that because he has lived in China for 18 years of his life, it is very hard for him to fit in to the American culture. Other participants also acknowledged the language and cultural challenges they faced and managed to talk more specifically about the experiences related to friend-making while

facing these challenges. For example, one student mentioned:

I have to begin new friendship with others and it’s hard, especially for the foreigner. We have some, I have the problem with the language, sometimes I don’t know how to express my mind, people may don’t get what I’m saying, and sometimes it’s the culture difference. So it makes me feel pretty weird. It’s a different kind of experience like what I experienced in China (T123, P2, 17-23).

For her, even though she felt the pressure to make new friends in America, unfamiliarity with English, miscommunication due to language difficulties, and cultural differences gave her a “weird” and “different” experience from when she was in China. This feeling was common among participants. Another student from China noted his language challenges, and mentioned that he had difficulty searching for the right words when he talked to his roommate. He stated, “I love these topics, but it’s just hard for me to communicate with him ‘cause of the article for category problems, some terminologies” (T106, P2, 26-28). Another participant also mentioned that because he speaks slowly, some domestic students may be impatient and he found it hard to start conversations when he first got to campus. According to these participants, despite their efforts to reach out to domestic students, specific challenges related to language, such as not knowing enough vocabulary, not being sufficiently fluent in the English language, and unfamiliarity with colloquial slang, have made it harder for them to make friends.

Other participants mentioned more specific challenges related to cultural differences. For example, one participant said that though it was easy for him to communicate on a deeper level with other international students due to similar backgrounds, it was hard for him go beyond superficial small talk with domestic students. For this participant, a lack of common background with domestic students and unfamiliarity with the American pop culture, resulted in him feeling like he did not know how to go about a deeper conversation besides the basic “what’s your major” type of questions. Yet another participant specifically described the challenges he faced because

of his cultural unawareness. He said,

American football doesn't make sense to me. I never play it. Also, baseball, I don't think we play baseball. So when they were talking about the games, the rules, it doesn't make sense. The only sport that I think I'm familiar with is soccer so that's why. And also, when people talk about some famous celebrity, I don't know who he or she is, so I cannot get into contact with them. I just listen and most of time, they will ignore me and I feel isolated from a big group because I feel hard to get into this group and communicate with them (T123, P1, 19-27).

Another participant described how unfamiliarity with the American pop culture has made him feel isolated from the group because he simply could not fit into their conversations. He said,

I think it's impossible because I don't know. Because they have different backgrounds and sometimes people from the U.S. they talk about stuff that is particularly to the U.S.... You know we don't really understand what the hell is going on (T117, P9, 7-18).

For him, both language and cultural barriers played a role in his friend-making process. He believed that forming deep and meaningful relationships with domestic students is impossible because he does not know the language or the culture well enough to keep the relationship going. This was a common trend among most of our participants that experienced language and cultural challenges. When students already have difficulties because they are unfamiliar with vocabulary and/or have a heavy accent, not knowing American pop culture and having little common background with domestic students compounds those difficulties.

Perceptions of peers and friendship formation

In addition to language and cultural challenges associated with forming friendships, limited perceptions of racial/ethnic groups represented on campus also posed a barrier to engagement with domestic peers. Overall, participants described domestic students as welcoming. For example, one participant stated, "Everybody is quite polite and [welcoming]. They are all very kind and willing to

help international students" (T112, P8, 35-37). In fact, participants said they did not feel that their domestic peers even made a distinction between domestic and international students on campus. One participant claimed "I don't think I really like divide by international and American. 'Cause like I just make friends in my class and I just hang out with them... So like, I don't really care like if they are international students or American students" (T122, P5, 2-6). Ultimately, participants denied feeling discriminated against based on their international status and felt that they were positively received as international students, at least at a surface level.

However, sometimes it was challenging to build relationships with domestic students because they perceived them to be superficial, or not very interested in building deep connections (T108, P5, 5). One participant said, "I am friends with a lot of [domestic students], but the connotation of the word friend here is that I'm more of an acquaintance than a friend" (T205, P2, 27-32). In describing domestic students as "aloof," this participant exemplifies how many international students formed what they believed to be only superficial relationships with domestic students (T205, P2, 37). For example, one participant described an instance where a domestic student did not demonstrate the same level of interest in developing a friendship. He felt that a domestic student "broke a promise" to meet at a certain time and thus prevented this participant from seeing him as a potential friend (T106, P8, 37-40). Participants noted superficiality among domestic students as well as their having previously formed friendship groups as primary barriers to meaningful interaction.

In describing perceptions of domestic peers, participants shared limited and stereotypical views of non-White domestic students. In some cases, the stereotypes were negative, which lead participants to not seek friendship with certain groups. For example, when commenting on his perception of African-American students, one participant stated:

Sometimes it's really hard to fit in with some other groups like Black people. I don't mean that Black people aren't good, I just mean like since we are international we are not born here, like the way we think is really different from them, and they like work out all day, and they can spend all their

time all day in a gym, or drinking (T229, P3, 15-20).

Other times, participants held less-negative, though nevertheless stereotypical views, of non-White students. Such views were equally limited and reflected limited interaction with domestic students. One student said,

I feel the Mexican group are more welcoming. They are more friendly to us. I have no idea of why, but yeah, I feel it's more easy to talk to the Mexicans rather than the White people. I don't know why when I talk to the White people, some girls are, really White ones the blonde hair, when I talk to them, they seem not too interested with what I'm talking to them (T117, P11-12, 41-4).

This participant references "really White" students as ones with blonde hair and notes their lack of interest in building a meaningful friendship. Yet it is the "really White" students whom participants saw as being "real Americans," and the students with whom they wanted to interact. Indeed, participants revealed a desire to interact with White domestic peers and with that, an understanding that non-White peers are not "real Americans" (T214, P7, 12-16). Though certainly all participants did not share this understanding, one participant did say, "most of the people that I know are Americans. And they're mostly not White Americans. They're like maybe Asian Americans, Persian Americans. Yeah, they're mixed. And I have found it way more harder to interact with real Americans, White Americans" (T214, P7, 12-16). Similarly, one participant identified his Jewish friends as non-White, stating that Jewish students were more like "Asian-Americans and Chinese students" (T206, P5-6, 27-4). Thus, participants articulated an understanding of Americans as White and talked about other ethnic groups as if they were not in the same category. Participants' perceptions, be they negative or positive, shaped their friend-making strategies often in ways that limited further interaction that might have challenged these stereotypical views.

Some students decided that they would have to look past the perceived faults of domestic students in order to build friendships with them. One participant said,

"I have to lower down my expectations and not be like—'cause then, I will have very small pool of friends to choose from if I don't accept people for—it's just the way they've been brought up and I can't fault them for thinking that way" (T205, P4, 10-13). Another participant stated that in previous weeks it had been his goal to have more domestic friends "but now, I just want to see how things are going. I'm not trying really hard to [make friends with domestic students]" (T128, P6, 19-23). This student opted to put less effort into making friends with domestic students. Other participants opted to seek friendships with American-born students of their same ethnic background (e.g. Chinese-Americans). The advantage of this friend-making strategy was that participants could get to know American customs from locals while maintain a cultural connection. One participant said of this strategy,

It's like connection between our Chinese culture and the American culture. I mean we come to the U.S. to study and to learn a country and try to fit in. It's too I don't know how to say, like too sharp to get in a group composed of Whites like local students. ABC [American-born Chinese] friends connection between the two backgrounds--they know China and they know America. They can teach us like how to say these words, like slangs like how to do these things in America, even how to tip when we are having dinner at restaurant (T129, P7, 13-20).

Ultimately, participants described limited experiences with discrimination and a positive overall campus environment. Deeper conversations with some participants, however, revealed negative perceptions of domestic peer groups that posed a barrier to meaningful connection between international and domestic students. Participants described adjusting their expectations to fit the reality in which some domestic students are not perceived as friendship material.

IV. Adjustment Experiences

International students faced other challenges to adjustment outside of the friend-making process, including adjusting to different educational values and structures, homesickness, and navigating their immigrant status and limits it imposes.

Differences in educational systems

The participants often found themselves needing to adjust to educational expectations that are different from their home country. Education institutions hold diverging expectations for students. International students were often unprepared for these differences as demonstrated by one student's uncertainty when learning about UCLA's various resources.

The Chinese education system is very different from the US, so when I first arrived here, I look up the, I browsed all those website. I just found there are too many facilities and student associations, clubs, some things in UCLA. And actually, I kind of don't know what to do (T106, P8, 3-8).

Another student noted confusion,

...about college life. For example, how to choose a major, how to network, and in general terms how to get involved and prepare yourself for like whatever internship or whatever. So that's a huge challenge for me now because I truly don't really know how that works (T227, P8, 26-30).

Participants struggled with understanding and interpreting educational values in the United States. Such challenges were barriers to students' attempts to succeed academically at UCLA. Some students struggled with the fact that they needed to be independent on campus and were responsible for their own schedules. Becoming self-dependent in time management was particularly challenging for students from Asian countries, where high schools typically arrange student's daily schedules during their time there. Arriving at UCLA, students initially found it difficult to manage these tasks alone. One participant felt he was unprepared and confused during the fall quarter because of this freedom. He said, "...usually in Chinese high school, all those things are arranged by school, so you don't have to collect all those information by yourself. So that's one thing if they can teach me in orientation I can appreciate" (T106, P8, 25-28).

Additionally, students from countries where academic achievement is the primary focus of formal education were unprepared for American educational expectations, which emphasize many other aspects of

personal development aside from academic success. For example, when reflecting upon his experience, one student from Hong Kong highlighted this unexpected emphasis.

Because I'm from Hong Kong and people work so hard on their grades, so I was brought up to be really, really hardworking and always reach for an "A," so when I come here, like at first, I thought that school was all about getting good grades and academics, but then I realized, gradually, that it's so much more than that (T215, P6, 5-10).

Given that this remark came from his winter quarter interview, it can be assumed that he only found out about this added emphasis after arriving at UCLA.

Moreover, some challenges are associated with the expectations on students' learning style and the amount of study time outside of the classroom. This was also more prevalent in students from Asian countries. Students who were trained in education systems where they have been mostly expected to learn passively by listening to lectures and doing mandatory homework found it difficult to transit to an active learning style. For example, when reflecting upon academic challenges, one of the participants referenced not being able to solely rely on lecture but having to spend additional effort to read his textbooks outside of class. He discovered this only after struggling academically his first quarter.

I think in the first quarter here, I relied mostly on listening to the lectures. Basically, I guess, depending on the professor to teach me the things, and that was a bad idea because I need to read the textbook by myself. The lectures, now they feel more just like a supplement to the stuff that I read on the textbooks, so reading a lot more (T220, P1, 25-29).

Lastly, international students expressed different cultural expectations when interacting with instructors. While students in the United States are encouraged to interact with the professor, in some cultures students are expected to behave formally with their superiors. For instance, one participant from China found it hard to communicate with his professor at an interpersonal level.

It's a cultural difference. In China, usually we don't talk to the faculties on campus a lot... Here in America, it is very important to just talk to teachers. Here, it's more equal relationship, but in China, the teacher is more higher status, and sometimes, I just feel like hard to reach out to them (T128, P10-11, 33-4).

Homesickness and loneliness

Homesickness was one of the most common experiences shared in the participant interviews. Although homesickness is not unique to international students, it played out in specific ways for these students. First, we identified a strong connection between homesickness and periods during which international students lived alone on campus. These included staying on-campus after orientation, long weekends and nationally recognized holidays such as Thanksgiving. Participants described,

Once the orientation ended, not a lot of people chose to stay through... I chose to stay through so there were not, there were barely any people... It was like a ghost town or something. You didn't, you did not see a single person. You had to walk two or three minutes to find another person somewhere, so ya, at that point it felt a little lonely (T105, P2, 24-30).

I've been lonely, but I have not felt isolated... for like 3 or 4 days when everyone is out of campus because few people stay through. I was like, "who, where is everyone?" (T108, P2, 22-29)

Participants described being particularly prone to homesickness during time periods when domestic students had the opportunity to visit home. As most participants were from Asian countries, which are typically more than 10 hours of flight away from Los Angeles, they did not enjoy the same level of freedom as domestic students to visit their families.

To alleviate these feeling of loneliness, participants typically employed two strategies. The first was to keep themselves occupied. It was common for students to try to distract themselves from feelings of homesickness by focusing on academic tasks.

I felt that [homesick] like a week ago cuz I

was video calling my mother and talking with my parents and I saw my dog. Yea I really miss it, my dog. That was the first time I feel homesick. Yea; but we are pretty busy. We have papers. We have lots of midterms. We have quizzes. So we don't have a lot of time to feel that way (T129, P12, 33-37).

Additionally, students also connected with their families via online chatting programs such as Skype. This was found to be a useful way to combat homesickness.

Generally, students expected some level of homesickness and as such did not perceive it as a major challenge to their adjustment. Rather, they considered it a natural process, which would eventually fade away as time passed. One participant noted,

The slight adjustment period I talked to you about—the four or five days—that was when I was like, "Oh, what's that? Where am I?" and stuff. Which is normal to me. But it's nothing special (T208, P4, 28-30).

Though almost all participants experienced some degree of homesickness, they were generally prepared for it. However, students did not anticipate having to spend time alone in the residential halls without domestic students. Their peers' privilege to visit home easily especially exacerbated feelings of homesickness.

Challenges associated with immigrant status

Participants expressed disappointment with their limited employment opportunities because of visa restrictions. International undergraduate students generally come to the US with F-1 student visas, which stipulate that students are not allowed to work off campus or work more than twenty hours per week. However, students were actively looking for internship opportunities to advance their academic careers and job opportunities or to financially support themselves. Students also struggled with limited research opportunities, for many positions are only open to U.S. citizens and permanent residents. One student articulated that a "lot of the research programs that I've been looking at, with respect to chemistry at least, on the website they require you to be a US citizen" (T221, P8, 18-23). Finally, another

student expressed that the biggest challenge has been unemployment.

International students are blocked off from working anywhere except on campus for a year...It's been oddly annoying. There was one time when I was in Santa Monica for an interview and I thought it was going so well and I got turned down after I went there to the job interview 'cause I told them I was international and I could only start working next year (T102, P2-3, 22-2).

Participants also commented on the financial burdens brought on by their visa status, and the inability to qualify for financial aid. One student specifically described the lack of financial aid as a burden that was "hard to cope with" (T226, P15, 36). What follows is a description of how, despite the aforementioned adjustment challenges, participants managed to engage with campus resources and what they shared about their overall perceptions of those resources.

V. Perceptions of Resources

Participants' perceptions of certain campus resources emerged naturally as they detailed their adjustment. Generally, students said there was an abundance of activities and resources at UCLA, but that they did not have time to attend all events or utilize all resources. These comments were common at the time of the first interview, after students had experienced Welcome Week, but were also made during the second interview in the winter quarter. One participant commented that "I'm here constantly and there are some cultural activities going on and some interesting stuff, but sometimes I don't have time to go to that kind of activities" (T227, P6, 19-21). Most participants saw involvement in campus activities as opportunities to meet new people and form friendships, although this did not always happen for reasons articulated above. One participant said, "At least I know there's opportunities for me to know them." However, she later commented that these opportunities do not lead to lasting friendships. She stated:

I will say, for example, you would just go for some activity then meet some new people, but it's kind of hard to keep in touch with them all the time, and sometimes you

just go there once, you meet people then sometimes you just forget (T227, P7, 1-4).

Most of the participants mentioned Orientation, which they perceived as one of the first places to make friends. However, several students mentioned having a hard time maintaining the relationships started there into their first and second quarter at UCLA. Some qualified the experience stating, "It was so easy to find a group of friends, but not friends, just like talking friends" (T114, P1, 15-16). For many, the opportunity provided by Orientation was still viewed positively given the perceived challenges to friendship making.

Many of the participants generally had positive views about on-campus housing. Students saw the residential halls as ideal for making friends, especially with domestic students. However, one student did note that her residential experience has been divided in such a way that hinders diverse friendship groups from forming. She noted, "Our floor is divided into two groups... The white group and like the nonwhite group" (T214, P7, 32-33).

Almost all of our participants mentioned the Dashew Center and knew it was available to support international students. Many also had some knowledge of the type of help the Dashew Center could provide and knew at least some of the events put on by the Center. However, there was a common perception that those who utilized the Dashew Center as a resource were those international students who were struggling, specifically with language, culture and friendship making. This is sentiment was summarized by one student,

I think that's pretty cool because I don't think people really look [at the Dashew Center's programs]- at least my friends, they don't look at the Dashew Center as a go-to thing. They look at it more like a backup thing. When they don't have anything else to do in UCLA, they at least have the Dashew Center to rely on (T221, P12, 35-40).

This exemplifies generally how many participants attempted to distance themselves from the common challenges faced by other international students. In doing so, these students underutilize the resources available to them. It is important to note that as these

students were aware of the programs and resources available to them through the Dashew Center, some expressed interest in participating in these programs. One student from China who was having difficulties adjusting to the academic and social climate of UCLA explained that the Dashew Center is "... a good place because international students don't really feel special any[where] else, especially in such a big place" (T221, P13, 9-11).

VI. Recommendations from Participants

The students in the study were asked whether they had any recommendations for how to improve the adjustment experiences of international student. The majority of recommendations centered on what other international students could do themselves to better adjust to life at UCLA, but some also focused on institutional changes.

Suggestions for Students

The most common suggestion was to talk to people and specifically join clubs even if it was uncomfortable to start. This was not only mentioned by those who had experienced challenges personally, but also those who felt they had not experienced any of the common challenges faced by international students such as language and culture barriers. Declaratives such as "Don't stay in the dorm all the time" and "Make mistakes" put the responsibility of belonging to UCLA on students themselves, rather than the institution. Ultimately, participants shared that adjustment is largely based on one's desire to succeed at UCLA and their openness to new experiences. One student stated simply, "Be more accepting about different cultures, opinions, mindsets, just be open" (T227, P9, 1-2).

Outside of what international students could do to make domestic friends, some students did not really reflect on what the university could do to help facilitate this interaction. Although she initially suggested facilitated interaction as a way to give international students and domestic students something in common to talk about, one participant explained, "I think even if they put more effort in helping students-I mean there's already enough help-but if they want to put more help in helping international students, I think it more depend on the students themselves" (T128, P12, 27-30). This followed the general trend of students minimizing the

challenges they faced, in the sense that challenges were made to be very personal, individual obstacles that could be overcome with enough effort.

Suggestions for the Institution

Some of the suggestions for the university were acknowledged as generally being beyond the control of UCLA, such as work opportunities and financial aid. In general they recommended making information more accessible to international students. One student also suggested UCLA be more knowledgeable about the education systems from which international students come from, especially as it pertained to transferring credit (T221, P9, 28-35). Some suggestions were for services that are, in fact, already being provided, such as one student's suggestion for "an international counselor [to provide] advice on daily issues, like the visa" (T212, P15, 11-12). This suggests that better communication of available resources to the student community could be helpful.

Two important recommendations had to do with how UCLA deals with holidays. Specifically, students expressed concern about the change to Winter break, stating that the shortening of the time period was unfair to international students who wanted to go home (T204, P13, 1-4). Along with this was the concern over shutting down the dining halls during holidays. This was problematic for international students. One student said simply, "Yes, it'd be really nice if they would stop doing that" (T202, P12, 27). Unlike many domestic students, international students do not have the freedom to go home as often and therefore require access to the residential and dining halls during national holidays and other break periods.

Conclusion

Data from this study indicate that international students have high expectations for their transition to UCLA and their ability to connect with domestic students. Although most students demonstrated knowledge of potential challenges associated with adjustment, such as cultural differences and language difficulties, some minimized the extent to which they believed they would be affected by these challenges. Once they arrived on campus, the international students in our study not only experienced such challenges, but also encountered challenges related to

forming meaningful relationships with domestic peers. Students expressed sometimes limited perspectives of domestic students and domestic student groupings, which presented serious challenges to forming connections. As a result of their experiences, students tended to manage and modify their expectations regarding what is an appropriate and supportive friend group at UCLA.

Implications

Based on the findings presented, it is important to note those that will be of practical significance in improving the adjustment experiences of first-year international students. Overall, students generally talked about their inability to connect with domestic peers or access campus resources as a result of their own limited experiences. While it is certainly up to individuals to decide whether or not to take advantage of opportunities presented, perhaps UCLA can consider whether students are carrying too much of the burden of supporting themselves and what the campus can do to better support them. In supporting the specific adjustment of international students, we need to continue to try to understand some of the unique and heightened ways adjustment challenges play out for them, such as feelings of homesickness that are exacerbated during periods of campus closure. In terms of language and cultural differences, are we examining how we are using language in our work? Departments should ensure that we are not unintentionally using language that is potentially isolating or confusing to international students, particularly slang or other colloquial terms that may not be familiar to an international audience.

With regard to employment and finances, it is important to note the challenges faced by international students in trying to obtain employment due to legal restrictions. Institutionally, we must consider how to provide more on-campus employment opportunities so that international students can also benefit from such opportunities that could potentially enrich their academic and professional lives. We should also consider opportunities for privately funded scholarship money that could be made available to international students so that some of the financial burden faced by students might be alleviated.

Lastly, perhaps the biggest area requiring attention is that of the sometimes negative perceptions held of domestic students. Findings from this study suggest that international student perceptions of domestic students, often stereotyped and limited, further contribute to limited engagement between international and domestic students. When international students have such high hopes for interacting with domestic students and there is much to be gained from their presence on our campus for our own students, we need to foster more positive peer interaction between international and domestic students. Discussions around race and privilege may be further complicated by differences in how these constructs are understood in various nations, but as we plan for opportunities for dialogue across difference, the experiences and perspectives of international students need to be considered as they are helping to shape campus climate for all students. We need to build opportunities for domestic and international students to connect, and ensure that we clearly communicate to students—both international and domestic—the value of their participation. Ultimately, promoting positive cross-cultural interactions remains one of the biggest challenges facing Student Affairs and American higher education, more broadly.