Language and Other Challenges: Faculty Perceptions of International Students

PHILADELPHIA -- Professors identify limited English proficiency and different academic preparation or expectations as the two biggest academic challenges international students face, according to results of a survey of DePaul University faculty presented Tuesday at the NAFSA: Association of International Educators conference.

The new findings are in line with previous research that found that professors question international students' language abilities and that their teaching practices aren't always aligned with their beliefs.

"On the one hand, faculty have good things to say about international students and they appreciate their presence, but at the same time they don't know what their role is or they don't know how to make changes in the classroom to adjust to these students," Jason Schneider, an assistant professor in the Department of Writing, Rhetoric and Discourse at DePaul, said in summarizing the results of a literature review on the topic.

Schneider and Li Jin, an associate professor in DePaul's Department of Modern Languages, surveyed all 1,865 full- and part-time faculty at DePaul about their perceptions of international students. A total of 261 faculty responded to the survey, which asked about their perceptions of the positive attributes brought by international students, the challenges faced by international students and the challenges they face as faculty in teaching international students.

For context, DePaul, a private university located in Chicago, enrolled 2,601 international students in 2016-17, accounting for 9.6 percent of the university's students, according to Jin. Slightly less than a third (30.7 percent) came from China, and other top countries of origin were

India, Saudi Arabia, South Korea and Nigeria. The statistics are not unusual for a university such as DePaul, which is classified as a doctoral university with "moderate research activity," according to the Carnegie Classification of Institutes of Higher Education.

About three-quarters (76.3 percent) of the responding faculty said that international students bring diverse views to campus, and 28.74 percent said international students usually perform better academically than other students. Twenty-eight faculty members (10.73 percent) cited the global perspectives students bring, while 21 faculty members (8.05 percent) said that international students enhance multilingualism on campus.

The top challenges they identified were, as noted above, limited English proficiency, cited by about 66 percent of faculty, and different academic preparation or expectations, which were cited by 26.3 percent of faculty surveyed. Other top challenges identified included social challenges related to loneliness and cultural differences; a full list of challenges cited by faculty is below.

	Number of Faculty	Percentage
Academic Challenges		
Limited English proficiency	173	66.28%
Different academic preparation or expectations	69	26.44%
Lack of confidence in speaking English	16	6.13%
Lack of knowledge of student rights and resources on campus	9	3.45%
Narrow worldview	5	1.92%
Lack of rigor	1	0.38%
Sociocultural Challenges		
Loneliness due to lack of social network	55	21.07%
Cultural differences	48	18.39%
Lack of daily life communication skills	38	14.56%
Discrimination and social exclusion encountered in the U.S.	37	14.18%
Self-seclusion	5	1.92%
Other		
Financial, Legal, Professional Challenges	12	4.60%

When asked about their own challenges in teaching international students, nearly half of faculty members (45.59 percent) once again cited students' own limited English proficiency. Nearly a quarter (24.9 percent) cited international students' lack of understanding of American academic culture.

"On the one hand [faculty are saying] yes, we appreciate that our international students are multilingual, but then they say the main challenge is English and even when we ask about their challenges they say it's English, that's the problem," Schneider said.

The faculty survey also looked for correlations between perceptions of international students and faculty members' own backgrounds in terms of their ethnicity, academic status, birth place, prior international experience, and skills in languages other than English. Out of more than 100 pairings, researchers found nine statistically significant relationships. These included:

- White faculty members were more likely than nonwhite faculty members to see international students' challenges in terms of English language ability. Similarly, faculty members born in the U.S. were also more likely than faculty born outside the US. to cite English language challenges. Those who spoke only English were also more likely than faculty who spoke two or more languages to focus on English language proficiency issues.
- Professors who were born outside the U.S. were more likely than faculty who were born in the U.S. to see international students' challenges as being related to different academic preparation or expectations.

The survey also asked faculty about seven practices they use in teaching international students. The most common were "I recommend the use of campus support services when helpful" (190 of the 261 professors said they "always" or "often" did this), "I actively create opportunities for international students to bring their unique cultural knowledge to class activities and assignments" (again, 150 of the respondents said they "always" or "often" did this), and "I adapt my communication style so that my language is more comprehensible" (137 chose "always" or "often").

Less common strategies included: "I take into account students' language backgrounds when assigning groups" (again, 104 said they did this "always" or "often"); "I consider my students' cultural backgrounds when planning my curriculum" (103 said "always" or "often"), "I make various accommodations in teaching and assignments, e.g. allowing students to use a bilingual dictionary during a test" (86 said "always" or "often") and "I grade the work of international students more leniently (32 said "always" or "often").

In addition to the quantitative research, the researchers also conducted interviews with two to three faculty members from each of DePaul's five largest colleges about effective practices for teaching international students and how their backgrounds inform their practices. Practices that emerged included empathizing with students' linguistic challenges -- the researchers quoted one faculty member who speaks Chinese and lived in Asia for 10 years as saying, "If I were a university student sitting in a classroom in China and having to write essays at the freshman, sophomore or junior level, I would -- it would be very difficult for me to do that as well" -- and creating a supportive classroom environment where international students are encouraged to speak. Other pedagogical implications identified by the researchers included

encouraging one-on-one meetings, providing out-of-class mentoring, integrating international students' cultural knowledge into assignments and discussions when possible, structuring multicultural group work, and adjusting assignments and grading.

"This idea of adjusting assignments and grading, this is very controversial. A lot of faculty say they do not do that, will not do that," Schneider said.

"I don't think any of us would advocate for making things 'easier' for international students, but rather thinking about the kinds of assignments we give and how we grade them and setting it up so that everyone can achieve success."

"It has to happen at the front end when you design assignments," Schneider continued. "It's about creating assignments and curriculum that are equal opportunity for everybody."

Student Voices

Another session at the NAFSA conference Tuesday provided a student view on these issues.

Researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles, reported on a research project they did in which international students interviewed their peers -- a total of 41, about half undergraduate and half graduate -- about their goals and expectations and also the barriers they faced in achieving those goals.

Lucrecia Mena Meléndez, a Ph.D. student in sociology who analyzed the data, discussed two main barriers that came up in the research: financial barriers and communication-related barriers.

Graduate students were more likely to cite financial barriers, which included the cost of living in Los Angeles, particularly housing costs, difficulties transferring money from their home country, stresses related to exchange rates or crashes of their home country's currency, ineligibility for external grant funding due to their lack of U.S. citizenship, and loan disbursement issues.

As for communication-related barriers, Meléndez quoted several students who participated in the study who described feeling self-conscious about their accent or language ability.

One said, "As an international student, I feel self-conscious all the time, especially in class or in discussions. You know if you have accent and stuff like that, people will know where you are from and it is so weird. I just feel so weird when I say stuff, they're gonna know, 'Oh, you're not from around here.' I don't know, I'm really not comfortable doing that, but I will get used to it eventually, I guess."

Another student said: "Maybe it's not other people's fault, but I just feel like I'm being different all the time. I feel like…I don't know why I'm really self-conscious about my accent, like how I express myself. So even if I'm in a club or in my group of people, I just feel like 'what if I say something wrong? I don't know the expressions.'"

Another international student who comes from an English-speaking country was also quoted as discussing challenges related to his accent. "They ask you 'what' like twice, because your

accent is pretty thick," the student said.

"Language and accent are the No. 1 campus climate issue for international students on our campus," said Amy Pojar, the assistant director of research and special projects at UCLA's Dashew Center for International Students and Scholars and a Ph.D. candidate at UCLA in international and comparative education. Pojar explained after the session that this finding comes from a survey UCLA does in which it asks international students how much they agree with the statement "people are respected regardless of" a range of characteristics including class, gender expression and language ability or accent. Students express the most disagreement with the idea that students are respected regardless or language ability or accent.

"Our students are experiencing microaggressions around language as well, so people will say, 'Why is your English so good,' and they'll feel very othered by that." Many of UCLA's students learn English at a young age, suggesting fluency, Pojar said, and UCLA's minimum standardized English testing requirements are relatively high.

Pojar described a need to "shift the narrative from a deficit perspective to really thinking about multilingualism as an asset and how we can tap into that on our campus." She stressed that what came up in the interviews as a barrier to academic success or social integration wasn't the students' objective English proficiency but rather their reported self-confidence in speaking English.

"We see that over and over again in the quotes," she said. "No one is telling us that their actual proficiency level is not up to standard. They're really talking about a sense of belonging."