

5-2012

Perception versus Reality: Assessing the Academic Experiences of the UNO Immigrant Community

Fahret Muminovic
University of New Orleans

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.uno.edu/honors_theses

Recommended Citation

Muminovic, Fahret, "Perception versus Reality: Assessing the Academic Experiences of the UNO Immigrant Community" (2012). *Senior Honors Theses*. 18.
https://scholarworks.uno.edu/honors_theses/18

This Honors Thesis-Restricted is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by ScholarWorks@UNO with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Honors Thesis-Restricted in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Honors Thesis-Restricted has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uno.edu.

**Perception versus Reality: Assessing the Academic Experiences of the UNO Immigrant
Community**

An Honors Thesis

Presented to

The Department of Liberal Arts
of the University of New Orleans

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of
Bachelor of Arts, with University Honors
and Honors in
The BA in International Studies Program's
Business Track

by

Fahreta Muminovic

May 2012

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Salmon Shomade, for his guidance and patience not only throughout this process, but also for his assistance during and after my undergraduate career. I also wish to thank my major advisor, Dr. John Hazlett, for his assistance and patience with my research, as well as my entire undergraduate experience with UNO. Finally, I would like to thank all the participants in my research process for aiding in its completion.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

SECTION	PAGE
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iii
LIST OF TABLES.....	iv
LIST OF FIGURES.....	v
ABSTRACT.....	vi
INTRODUCTION	1
RELATED LITERATURE REVIEW	3
METHOD	10
Sample.....	10
Measures.....	11
Influential Factors.....	11
Extracurricular Activities with Academic Benefits.....	11
Academic Programs.....	12
Academic Successes.....	12
Level of Adjustment.....	12
FINDINGS.....	13
Overall.....	13
Ethnic Composition.....	14
Factors Influencing Student Choice of UNO.....	15
Academic Expectations.....	16
Academic Realizations.....	17
Extracurricular Academic Programs.....	19
Level of Adjustment.....	20
Possible Correlations.....	20
CONCLUSIONS.....	22
LIMITATIONS.....	25
IMPLICATIONS.....	26
REFERENCES.....	28

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE		PAGE
TABLE 1	SURVEY	29

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE		PAGE
FIGURE 1	RESPONSE RESULTS	13
FIGURE 2	ETHNIC COMPOSITION OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS	14
FIGURE 3	COMPARISON OF INFLUENTIAL FACTORS AMONG INTERNATIONAL AND DOMESTIC STUDENTS	15
FIGURE 4	CORRELATION CHART	21

ABSTRACT

The purpose of my study is to compare the academic experiences of international students with those of domestic students at the University of New Orleans (UNO). Specifically, I aimed the study towards determining international students' perceptions and expectations of UNO, and assessing whether or not UNO's ability to meet their expectations had an impact on student success or failure at UNO. To test this, I asked various international and domestic students to respond to a survey consisting of both open-ended and multiple choice questions. The open-ended questions were designed to capture the student experiences on expectations, academic atmosphere, and overall college life, all of which are likely to vary from one student to the other. The multiple choice questions were on student status, tenure, and other items that can easily be classified into distinct categories. I collected and analyzed the surveys over a period of four months to decide which variables in the international students' experiences affect their academic career. In addition, I questioned if any of the stated variables aided in campus adjustment or helped meet the student expectations regarding school performance and goals. Results indicate that the majority of students, both domestic and international, feel their academic expectations are being met by what UNO has to offer. Those students who feel their expectations (of what UNO would provide them) are not met indicated their academic performance is reflective of their own efforts, an idea that students feel is fostered by UNO. However, there was no significant factor that may have helped or deterred positive experience overall.

Keywords: international, students, expectation, academic, success, domestic, goal, UNO

INTRODUCTION

Increased globalization has led to many changes in the infrastructures of individual countries around the world. Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has been more aware of worldwide changes in economics, politics, and the limited supply of resources (Hser 2005, 35). One of the most important resources that countries have to offer one another is the education of future generations. As a result, within the last decade, the exchange of international students among different countries has been increasing. The United States has been making adjustments to its education system in response to increasing global awareness and the need to prepare students for their futures within and, potentially, outside the country. US academic institutions have been restructuring their curriculum by incorporating elements that allow for the better integration of both domestic and international students. Some of these include the offering of degrees in foreign languages or the offering of study abroad programs (45). All these efforts have enabled students to make smoother transitions to the global economy they enter upon graduation.

Accordingly, many researchers and scholars have attempted to study the adjustment of international students to discern the factors that foster a successful transition to US college life. However, they disagree over what factors are significant in helping incoming international students successfully adapt and adjust to their host institutions. Some factors that have been studied include language, cultural similarity, distance from home, motivation or reason for transition, duration of stay, preparation, interaction within the new setting, and gender and age (Darcy, McWhirter, and Tomich 2003, 23). Any one of these factors can either help or hinder a student who is seeking to successfully achieve his goals when studying abroad.

As a person born abroad and who migrated to the US prior to attending college, I have been influenced by both my native land and the US. My personal experience is part of the reason why I decided to conduct research on international students at the University of New Orleans (UNO). Located within one of the most diverse cities in the US, UNO has also experienced a growth in the number of international students on campus. Specifically, a total of 1,167 international students, both undergraduate and graduate, attended UNO during the 2011-2012 school years. Various programs, particularly international exchange programs, help create awareness of UNO around the world. To get an overview of international students' academic experience, it is important to assess expectations of what UNO has to offer, the kind of atmosphere it provides for students, and the kind of opportunities it presents them once they are on campus. It was important for me to answer these questions because I am part of the international student community, and being born outside the US, I could relate to their experiences.

Therefore, to test these elements and determine the ways by which various students integrate themselves, I examined the reasons why international students chose UNO to pursue their undergraduate or graduate degrees. I conducted a study over a four month period through surveying. I distributed the survey questionnaires in person and by email. After I collected the completed surveys, I combined and evaluated the data. Results indicate that although UNO is making efforts to create a studious and competitive atmosphere, international students feel it is up to them to achieve outcomes that matched their expectations of what UNO has to offer. As a result, this suggests that UNO encourages self-sufficiency, and although the institution provides outlets for international students to support one another, these outlets do not have a significant effect on the overall academic aspirations of these students.

RELATED LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on this topic focuses on student adaption to institutions. I evaluated these sources to determine how to conduct research on international students at UNO. I also used the findings produced by these studies to compare with the results generated from my study.

An assessment of the experiences of international students at four-year institutions was done by Gregory Anderson, Karen Y. Carmichael, Todd Harper, and Tzufang Huang. In their 2009 article, they discuss the developmental needs and issues international students face when they attend schools outside their own countries. After describing the various issues related to students' adaptation, they provided strategies that can help ease the transition. The information that pertains to my research involves the students' academic needs, the psychological issues they face, as well as the effects of tuition costs. According to their research, academic success is the first priority of international students. Having demonstrated their intellectual capacities at home, the international students are expecting to perform as well in the US, not only to meet their own expectations, but also to meet those of their families. In addition, performing well creates greater confidence within their new environment (20). As a result, international students strive to succeed academically.

Besides noting the students' internalized sense of the value of academic success, the research suggests that student perceptions of their own academic performance can either help or hinder them in their efforts to adapt to the new environment. The research mentions various differences between the host institution and the students' home institutions that can cause difficulties, including differences in language, educational culture, and student-faculty relationships. Difficulties with language can sometimes prevent effective communication. A different educational culture and mode of instruction can cause problems as well. In US

universities, for example, classroom interactions are often open and relaxed, which some international students may perceive as disrespectful (21-4). This perception contributes to the unwillingness of such students to participate and it can, unsurprisingly, have a negative effect on their academic success.

This uneasiness can also have a negative effect on international students' mental well-being. Some of the psychological issues that are most common to international students are feelings of homesickness, loneliness, stress, or anxiety and any of them may hinder a student from adapting psychologically to a new setting. The length of time it takes for a student to adapt determines the success of his/her academic progress. Some factors that affect this time factor include the students' proficiency in English, the student's previous experience in cultural adjustment, and the student's access to various support systems (19). Because these factors are so important to the outcome of international students' academic progress, universities must create an environment that allows them to adjust as quickly as possible.

Finally, another aspect of previous research that pertains to UNO is tuition costs. Nearly 80 percent of international students pay for their education with the help from their parents or overseas agencies, and this creates a challenge to student adjustment. Many students desire financial aid and part-time employment to reduce the financial burdens on their parents. About 70 percent of international undergraduate students pay full tuition without financial aid, in contrast to the 24 percent of U.S. undergraduates who pay full tuition (23). At UNO, because international students are designated as out-of-state students, their tuition costs triple those of domestic students that are Louisiana residents. This inequity demonstrates the importance of providing financial support for international students if they are to perform as well as their American counterparts.

Similar research in 2003 on factors that affect adaptation was done by Darcy, McWhirter and Tomich. They conducted a study within a small, internationally-focused, graduate school in Connecticut. Among the main factors they tested were skill, personality, demographics, and attitude. Skill factors include characteristics of the individual such as facility with the local language (which is positively correlated to the ease and stability of adjustment), academic achievement, and college satisfaction. Without a language barrier, a student is able to interact with the host population and as a result, develop a mutual understanding (25). Attitudinal factors mentioned included the gap between signs, beliefs, and values of the home and the host countries. Living in an area with a culture that has little in common with their home culture can affect the students' day to day life and their academic performance. For example, Europeans acculturate better within the US than Asians, Africans, or South Americans do (25-6). As a result, their transition process is much smoother.

In addition to whether or not students' home and host cultures share common ground, Darcy's research group suggests that motives also affect the level of adaptation. Students who see the new country as a home have a greater desire to "fit in" than those who do not. Among students who are less likely to see the host culture as "home" are exchange students, business travelers, and tourists, all of whom plan to return to their home country (26). Aside from the desire to be part of their new community, the study indicates that the greatest acculturation and assimilation is achieved through the relinquishment of native culture and adoption of the host country's culture (27). In other words, those students who are willing to make the host cultures' customs their own are much more likely to adapt successfully.

Further, Darcy's group focused on the role gender played in adaptation, but this is not examined in my research. I did not utilize this factor because there was a higher male to female

ratio at UNO, and the sample size for women would not have been sufficient to produce significant results.

Aside from gender roles, the main personality factors Darcy's group examined included students' openness to new information, new ways of doing things, and minimal resistance to change (28). They point out that these factors are culture specific as a trait may aid in adaptation in one culture, but hinder it in another. After testing for the influence of these factors, Darcy's group found that Asian students had a harder time adapting to life in the United States than their European counterparts did (29-30). As this is similar to the previous results on the importance of finding common ground, it indicates the necessity to study adaptation of students using similar factors despite different locations.

Other research suggested the importance of family background, parental attitudes, peer support, and immigrant students' own attitudes and behaviors for academic achievement. Andrew Fuligni tested these factors on students of Latino, East Asian, Filipino, and European backgrounds in his 1997 study. The results demonstrate that first and second generation students performed better in subjects such as English and Mathematics than their native counterparts. Not only were there variations among different generations, but there were also variations in backgrounds. Specifically, East Asian students performed better on average than Latin and European students (360). Fuligni attributed this to the stronger motivation and study habits that East Asian students possessed in contrast to their peers. He concluded that despite the difficulty of adjusting, the educational incentive and dedication of these students generated greater success in school (362). One reason for these habits is the strong emphasis on education shared among students and their parents (351). The conclusions regarding the relationship between variations in

academic performance and different backgrounds are similar to those reached by Darcy, McWhirter, and Tomich.

Fuligni also tested the effect of parental perceptions on the value of academic success. Parents who felt that their children's education was a way to a better life had a positive effect on children's academic performance and adaptation. In addition to parents' expectations, Fuligni measured the students' own educational aspirations and the impact those aspirations have on their overall academic experience (351-2). The results indicated that these factors and independent study time enhanced their achievements, while their parents' aspirations and peer influences did not have a significant effect. Fuligni suggested that this was because parental and peer influences were channeled through the students' own aspirations (361). As part of my present research project, parental influence and students' own perceptions of what is expected of them, as well as how well they need to perform, are taken into account. I incorporate these factors within my survey questions to determine whether or not any correlations exist between previous research and UNO's international students' responses.

To explore the relationship between school setting and student effort, Julia Kaufman (2004) conducted a study of students' perceptions and social/cultural factors that influence their lives in school. I used her article to help formulate questions regarding student adjustment to the UNO setting, in addition to exploring reasons between variations in effort. Specifically, Kaufman tested the difference between Chinese immigrant students' and second-generation Chinese students' expectations of classroom settings. Kaufman defined immigrant students as those who were not born in the US, thus I felt it would be relevant to my research on international students. She also examined the effects of cultural tools available within their social environment. Finally, she looked at the effect of differences in effort. In particular, she discusses

elements of these communities which encourage academic achievement and attributes success to social bonds and networks that sustain common goals among individuals (1278). Kaufman explains low effort through the theory of “oppositional cultural minority,” which states that students from oppressive cultures tend to resist the host cultural system and therefore put less effort in school (1279). Her results after several months of observing and interviewing immigrant students indicate that they feel their successes were due to hard work, whereas they attribute failure to lack of effort or the lack of opportunity to put forth effort. Non-immigrant students share the same belief regarding effort, but unlike immigrant students, non-immigrant students are willing to choose not to put in the effort to succeed, whereas the immigrant students feel they did not have a choice regarding the amount of effort they put in (1281). She also mentions that these bonds and networks are established through similar interest programs. I utilized this information for my survey questions because of its pertinence.

In addition, Kaufman determined that the majority of non-immigrant students in her study felt that some classes were not as challenging as expected and were often boring while immigrant students made no such remarks. Rather, the immigrant students felt that their professors are less strict and less serious than the professors they were accustomed to in their home country (1292). This conflict with the relaxed atmosphere within the classroom setting corresponds to the effects of different educational and faculty cultures discussed in Anderson, Carmichael, Harper, and Huang’s 2009 article.

To explain the different results between the two groups, Kaufman suggests that immigrant students, in contrast to non-immigrants, do not have time to experience the economic failure of their parents resulting in their hard work and good behavior. In other words, immigrant students have not been present in their host countries long enough to witness that hard work,

good behavior, and persistence does not always lead to desired success. Additionally, Kaufman observes that since the immigrant students are well integrated within their communities, they benefit from the support and reinforcement of the values of the hard work these communities provide (1295). The level of influence of parents is more prominent in Kaufman's research than in Fuligni's, demonstrating the complex nature of student adjustment and the variations among different locations.

Douglass and Thomson (2010) also conducted a study to determine the dynamics of race, ethnicity, and choice of major of immigrant students compared to native students in California. After an overview of the history of immigration in California, Douglass and Thomson discuss various University of California (UC) campuses and how they contributed to the cultural, economic, educational, and social capital of California. Similar to Fuligni's research, Asian-Americans achieve greater academic success in comparison to Euro-Americans (462-3). Furthermore, this ties in with the orientation of immigrant students taking courses or majors that may lead to professional employment (465). Students focus on taking courses in Science and Engineering, as well as programs that are professionally oriented (466). Finally, the researchers discuss major preferences, perceptions, and experiences of Euro-American students, Chinese students, and Chicano/Latino students. Results indicate that Euro-American students have a better time integrating and are more likely to study Economics and Sociology, while Chinese students have lower satisfaction in their overall academic and social experience and choose majors in Electrical Engineering and Computer Science (469-71). Douglass and Thomson conclude their study by recommending that scholars and policy makers take into account the many variables and characteristics that relate to immigrant status in order to fully grasp the changing and increasingly multiracial economic world (472). I use their research as a base for

my survey questions to determine whether particular groups of students believe UNO provides fields of study which they can succeed in.

METHOD

Sample

To obtain an overview of the entire student population, I designed and distributed a survey consisting of twenty-five questions to 404 students at UNO, including international and domestic students. The questions pertained to various factors that might contribute to or hinder academic success. I initially gathered the sample from both international and domestic students in order to compare their experiences and possibly detect any differences. I modeled the two classifications of students according to UNO's own enrollment classifications. International students are defined as students from other countries who come to the United States for the primary purpose of obtaining a degree (Anderson et al. 2009, 18); domestic students are those who have completed their high school career within the US. I asked whether or not students wanted to participate in the study prior to distribution of the survey. I structured the survey to hide the target audience, in this case international students, and to eliminate potential bias. I kept the sample as random as possible, with no attention to factors such as age, gender, or number of years attending UNO. I asked questions about the number of years the students attended UNO to make sure a variety of students were included within the survey. Later, I directed my study strictly towards international students because the initial survey responses were not sufficient to provide meaningful results. I distributed the surveys to all five colleges at UNO: Liberal Arts, Sciences, Education, Business Administration, and Engineering. Moreover, I forwarded the surveys to various organizations with a significant student outreach, including International Student Organization, the Latin American Student Association, the Vietnamese American

Student Organization, and Amnesty International. My primary method of distribution was through email because of its convenience, but I distributed some directly. The questions were formulated to assess the success or failure of UNO to meet international students' expectations, and the effect this had on the students' overall impression of UNO. I used a combination of multiple choice and open-ended questions. As individual experiences differ, I kept the questions regarding the student expectations, UNO's academic atmosphere, and realizations of expectations open-ended. Questions on student status, tenure, and other items that can easily be categorized, I designed as multiple-choice questions. I distributed and collected the surveys over a four month period, from October to December of 2011, and from January to February of 2012.

Measures

Influential Factors

To efficiently address who had the most impact on perceived success or failure at UNO, I asked students who influenced them the most in their decision to come to UNO. Furthermore, I asked students what aspect of UNO influenced them the most in deciding to attend. Relying on studies that emphasize the importance of parents in the success or failure of students' academic experiences, in addition to assessing students' own aspirations and expectations regarding their choice of UNO, I asked about parental influence. I also took into account choices that focused on influence beyond the students' household.

Academic Expectations

Since student expectations of a university vary significantly, I left the question of what the student expected of UNO open-ended. In order to discern whether or not the various expectations of international students have been met by the school and how that has affected their overall experience, it was important to determine what those expectations were and how

much effort UNO puts into meeting them. I also had to assess the efforts students themselves put forth to make sure that their expectations of the University were met. In this way, I attempted to discern the difference between how much UNO contributes and the effect the international students' own efforts have on their own overall success.

Extracurricular Activities with Academic Benefits

I felt it was important to evaluate international students' involvement in extracurricular activities that provide academic benefits to see if that involvement played a role in the overall academic experiences of the students. These non- academic programs (such as International Student Organization, Honors Council, or Model UN) that foster student interactions, while not formally academic programs, still afford students the opportunity to engage each other academically. Academic programs are those offered by institutions that contribute to the students' understanding, development, and preparation for the future. Further, I analyzed the possible connections between participation in these programs and the level of adjustment.

Academic Successes

I tested academic successes using both open-ended and multiple choice questions to determine whether or not student expectations were met, and whether or not UNO surpassed those expectations. I also asked students to provide information regarding their realizations in terms of the grades they received, the influences that helped them attain their goals, and about those factors that deterred them from the attainment of those goals.

Level of Adjustment

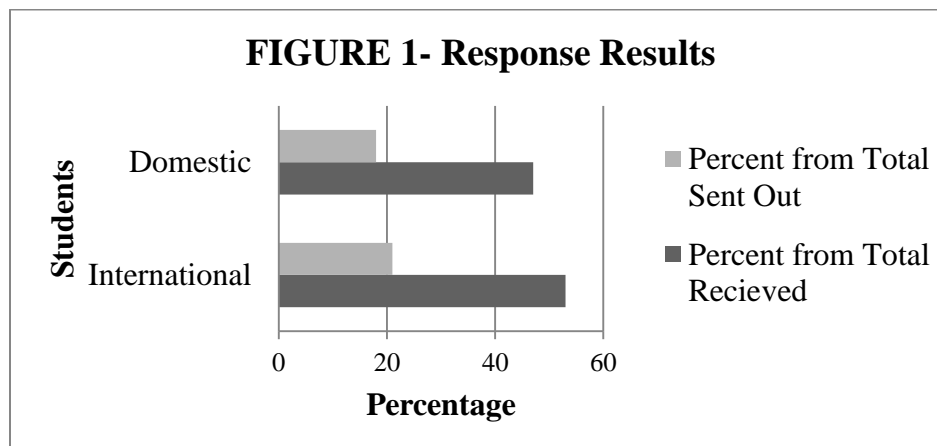
I measured the level of adjustment that students felt they have achieved in order to determine how comfortable they were in the university and what aided them as well as prevented that adjustment. I define adjustment as, "the internal transformation of an individual challenged

by new cultural environment in the direction of increasing fitness and compatibility in that environment” (Darcy, McWhirter, and Tomich 2003, 24). I used this information to determine the impact adjustment has on overall academic experience.

FINDINGS

Overall

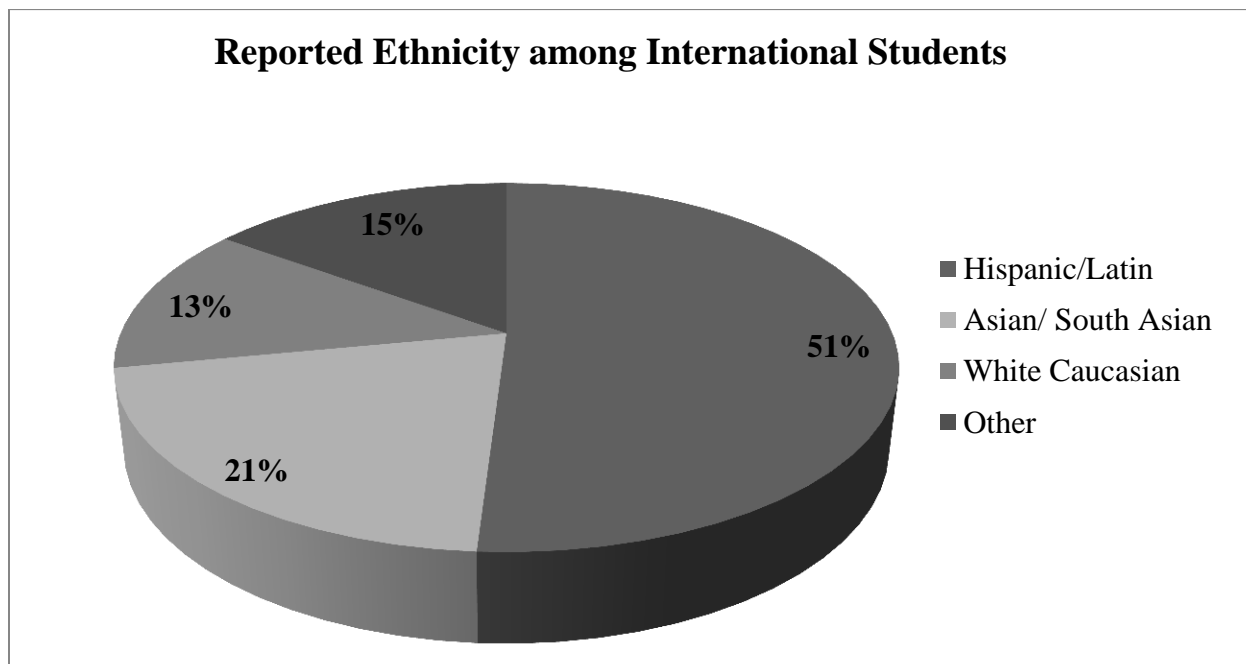
Out of the 404 surveys that were distributed during the four month period, a total of 158 surveys were completed and returned, generating a response rate of 39 percent. Of these, eighty-four were from international students, a 53 percent response rate out of the number of surveys received and 21 percent of the total number of surveys distributed. Seventy-four of the responses came from domestic students, roughly 47 percent of the total number received and 18 percent of the total number of surveys that were distributed. Of the total of 1,167 international students that attended UNO during the 2011-2012 academic school year, the response rate was 7 percent. Although the response rate was relatively low, it does not diminish the usefulness of the information. A great majority of the domestic students, specifically 92 percent, are US citizens. A slight majority, specifically 57 percent of the international students, intend to prolong their stay in the US after completing their degrees, while the remaining hope to return to their home countries after completing their studies.



Ethnic Composition

About 51 percent of the international students classified themselves as Hispanic or Latin, while 21 percent classified themselves as Asian or Southeast Asian. The third most common ethnic identification is White or Caucasian with 13 percent. The remaining 15 percent consisted of German, Serbian, African American, Nepali, Egyptian, and Middle Eastern backgrounds. The majority of domestic students who responded identified themselves as Caucasian or White, with Hispanic having the second most responses. The rest were scattered among African American, Arab-American, Vietnamese-American, and those of mixed descent. Finally, the number of years that the respondents have been at UNO varied evenly across the board for both international and domestic students. This means that students with different number of years of exposure to UNO were represented within the research in equal proportions.

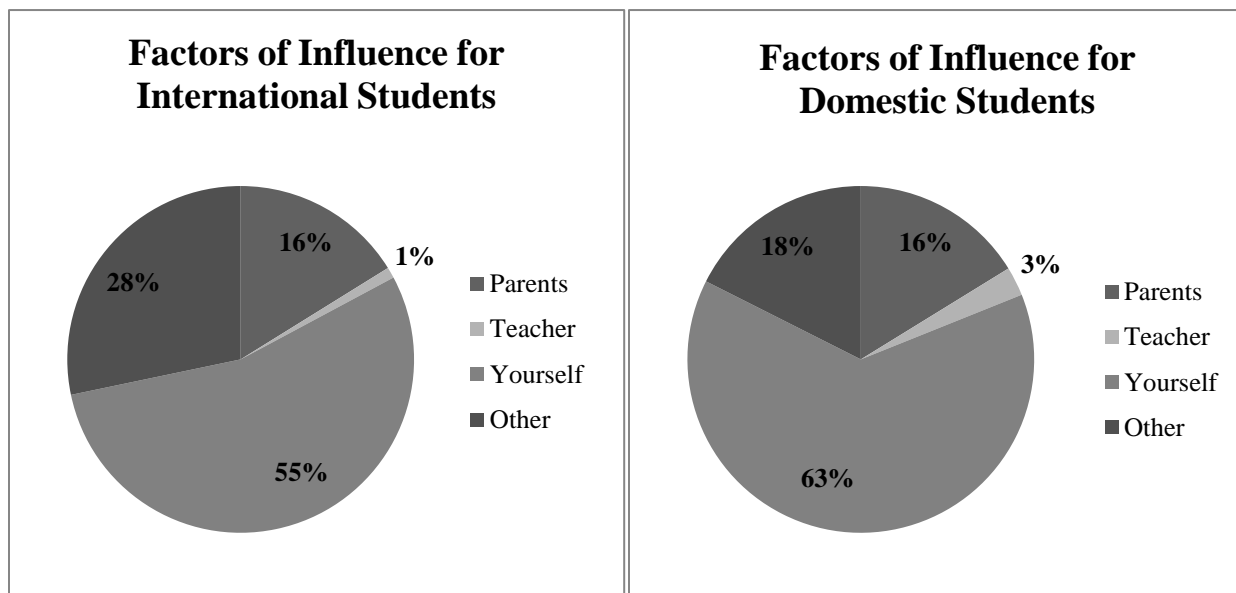
FIGURE 2- ETHNIC COMPOSITION OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS



Factors Influencing Student Choice of UNO

Despite the findings of previous research, parents are not the main influence on international students' choice to attend UNO. The results indicate that the majority of both domestic (55 percent) and international students (63 percent) made the decision themselves. Parents rank the third highest as an influence in the students' choice of UNO. I linked parental influence and the level of significance their influence had on students within my survey. Among the international students who identified parents as the most influential persons in their choice, 71 percent of those students said it was a significant amount. Besides student decision and parental influence, out of the students that chose the other option as the most influential choice, a noticeable percentage (34 percent) of international students attended UNO because of the offered scholarships. Domestic students did not show the same results and the results were too scattered to detect any similarities.

FIGURE 3- COMPARISON OF INFLUENTIAL FACTORS OF INTERNATIONAL AND DOMESTIC STUDENTS



Academic Expectations

The majority of the student respondents expected UNO to provide an academically challenging program that would be difficult but engaging, and that would provide them with lots of opportunities for social activities, internships, and research. Also, the students expected the professors to have exceptional credentials in their fields. Another repeated reason for choosing UNO was the strength of specific majors. The programs students felt had a strong curriculum were in Biology, Business, and Engineering, with several mentioning the Film Program. Besides completing a degree, many other international students simply desired to obtain a quality education, and felt that UNO could provide that education. Interestingly, some Latin American students chose UNO because they believed it would provide a better education than the one they could have received in their home country. One student stated, “I was sure I could receive a better education at UNO than in any other place back in my country.” Another student expressed his expectations regarding UNO as having, “Academically challenging courses with open opportunities to apply theory into practice, and hoping that UNO offered academic programs that were well-ranked (Top 50-100) in the U.S.”

In addition to a good education, several students wanted to experience a different setting and get integrated into a diverse culture. Finally, a small number of students had either no expectations or did not know what UNO had to offer before arriving. Overall, most international students expected to obtain a quality education that was both challenging and engaging. Only a few responses expressed negative expectations.

UNO domestic students expressed no significant differences in expectations from those expressed by international students. The majority of domestic students also expected UNO to

provide a challenging, high quality education, along with various opportunities during and after the attainment of their degree. Among these expectations were research opportunities, internships, and work offerings. Furthermore, in equal numbers, students expected to graduate with high grades. Similar to the experiences of international students, the reputations of various departments or colleges attracted domestic students to attend UNO, namely the Engineering, Biology, Film, and English Programs. The rest of the students were divided between not having any expectations and a slight number focusing on the diversity that UNO might provide.

Beyond what UNO had to offer, I also conducted an assessment of the perceived effort students put into their school work by asking them directly.¹ I did this in order to better discern the difference between how much UNO contributed to students' academic success and how much the students themselves did. The results indicated that both international and domestic students put forth significant effort, with 50 percent of international students and 48 percent of domestic students.

Academic Realizations

Regarding the academic atmosphere that UNO created for international students, no significant unified impression emerged; responders recorded both positive and negative experiences. A notable number of students felt that UNO was very relaxed but also very engaging. One student responded,

I think UNO has a very good academic atmosphere. The dedication of the faculty members towards teaching and maintaining higher academic standard at UNO along with the university's efforts to keep a sound academic environment have helped UNO succeed in keeping a body of equally dedicated and hardworking students. And all of this I believe has helped create a very healthy academic atmosphere.

¹ This is question 10 in the survey.

In contrast, another student stated, “The academic atmosphere is good but it could do better, like encourage teachers to teach better and offer more classes.”

These responses indicate that students had varying feelings and impressions about UNO faculty; some felt that faculty was helpful and engaging, while others felt that instructors were not engaging students and were uninterested in creating significant relationships. Along with the importance of student-professor relationships, international students touched on the importance of social events and the lack of attractive ones at UNO. Domestic students also had mixed feelings about the atmosphere UNO created. Contrary to international students, the majority of domestic students felt that UNO was focused on studies, with few social events offered on campus; this, they felt, was due to the fact that many students were commuters. Similarly, domestic students had varying experiences with their professors, as they felt the professors frequently showed little enthusiasm in helping students, thus creating a necessary self-sufficiency. Overall, regarding the academic atmosphere at UNO, the majority of students surveyed felt that it was an encouraging atmosphere that helped them achieve their goals.

In terms of grades, 67 percent of the international students strived for “excellent grades,” but only 34 percent reported that they achieved their objectives. Domestic students also strived to obtain excellent grades, but the grades received were fairly spread equally among the “below average,” “average,” “above average,” and “excellent” answer choices. International students indicated that their grades were mostly distributed between “above average” and “excellent” choices. While the majority of both international and domestic students felt that their grades reflected their efforts, some students felt that in many of their classes, their grades did not reflect their knowledge or they felt that they were graded unfairly. Another group of students felt that the grades they were receiving were higher than the amount of effort they placed into achieving

those grades. Finally, another frequent response among the students who felt that their grades did not reflect their efforts reported that in those classes in which they worked hardest they performed poorly; while in the classes to which they gave less attention they received excellent grades.

I also asked the students how important it was for them to have their expectations met. The majority of both international and domestic students felt that it was “somewhat important” to have their expectations met. Those students who felt strongly that their expectations needed to be met felt that most of their unfulfilled expectations were the result of their own lack of significant effort, with no mention of UNO’s failure to help them obtain their goals.

Extracurricular Academic Programs

On the question of extracurricular programs that offer academic benefits,² students responded by listing extracurricular activities that they were part of. My study found that participation in the clubs and organizations offered on campus was not as important as I had hoped. International students considered extracurricular programs as merely “somewhat important” to their overall academic experience; specifically 67 percent. In contrast, nearly half of the responses from domestic students, specifically 48 percent, felt that the extracurricular programs they joined were very important to their academic experiences. The percentage of students who reported they had participated in any extracurricular programs that provide supplementary academic benefits was within the same range for both international and domestic students, 30 percent for international students and 27 percent for domestic. The majority of students, who reported some type of participation, chose programs that pertained to their degree in some way, with few reporting participation in programs of general interest. For example,

² 1. This is question 12 on the survey. In hindsight, the question could have been worded differently.

students majoring in Biology were part of the Pre-Dental Honor Society. In addition, Civil Engineering majors were part of the American Society of Civil Engineers. This is important to note as it may have contributed to the reported “comfortable” atmosphere that UNO created, but it also may have contributed to the belief that these programs did not help in adjustment. In other words, I feel that when students allow themselves to enter a new setting, their ability to adjust is enhanced. Thus, UNO students do not show the personality factors such as students’ openness to accept new information or accept change discussed by Darcy’s group regarding their choice of choosing comfortable extracurricular programs.

Level of Adjustment

Both international (64 percent) and domestic (50 percent) students felt that they had made a significant adjustment to the UNO community. Neither international nor domestic students felt that involvement in extracurricular programs contributed significantly to adjustment to campus life, with 60 percent of international students reporting that such involvement was “somewhat important,” and 46 percent for domestic students reporting likewise. Overall, there was a 57 percent response of those students interviewed who felt they had made a significant degree of adjustment to UNO. Most students who responded to the open question regarding what contributed to their adjustment identified “parties” or off campus events that helped generate friendships outside the academic setting.

Possible Correlations

To assess possible correlations between responses to different questions within the survey, a correlation chart was created. The results indicated a strong positive correlation between the perception of adjustment to campus and the perception of the importance of after

school programs. Likewise, a strong positive correlation exists between the perception of the helpfulness of academic programs in a student's adjustment to UNO and the perception of the difficulty of adjustment. That is to say, the more difficult students perceive adjustment to be, the stronger they perceive the usefulness of extracurricular programs. No strong positive correlation existed between other elements of the survey.

FIGURE 4- CORRELATION CHART

		Citizenship	Grade	AdjtoUS	AftImp	Useaft	Unolength
Citizenship	Pearson Correlation	1	.114	.142	.000	-.031	.002
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.162	.091	1.000	.732	.985
	N	158	152	143	118	125	157
Grade	Pearson Correlation	.114	1	.096	-.026	-.062	.045
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.162		.261	.787	.500	.586
	N	152	152	138	114	120	151
AdjtoUS	Pearson Correlation	.142	.096	1	.275**	-.283**	-.065
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.091	.261		.004	.001	.444
	N	143	138	143	108	125	142
AftImp	Pearson Correlation	.000	-.026	.275**	1	-.163	.015
	Sig. (2-tailed)	1.000	.787	.004		.113	.874
	N	118	114	108	118	96	117
Useaft	Pearson Correlation	-.031	-.062	-.283**	-.163	1	.089
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.732	.500	.001	.113		.326
	N	125	120	125	96	125	124
Unolength	Pearson Correlation	.002	.045	-.065	.015	.089	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.985	.586	.444	.874	.326	
	N	157	151	142	117	124	157

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

CONCLUSIONS

Previous research on international student attitudes emphasizes that the first priority for international students is attaining academic success. This was evident among both the international and the domestic students at UNO as their expectations were very high of UNO in terms of the academic atmosphere it created. Further, the study done by Anderson, Harper, Huang and Carmichael indicated that professor-student relationships and the professors' manner of speaking have a significant impact on the overall adjustment and academic success of international students; both international and domestic students indicated that this was true of their experiences at UNO. Specifically, students felt that while some professors at UNO were knowledgeable in regards to their respected subjects, others felt that professors fell short of the students' expectations. As a result, students felt that they had to rely on themselves to succeed at UNO. Nonetheless, the fact those students referred to their experiences with professors at UNO shows how important UNO professors are in creating successful academic experiences for international students.

In addition to correlations with previous research on student-professor relationships, correlations were found regarding the importance of finances. Anderson's group discussed the importance of financial aid in students' choice of school, and several international students mentioned that the availability of scholarships was the most influential factor in their decision to come to UNO. As many international students wish to avoid burdening their parents with finances for travel abroad, many consider financial aid as very important in their school selection. One student described his experience this way:

There are different standards for international students. I am studying on scholarship that only covers certain number of credit hours and I have a specific date that I have to graduate by. It is imperative that I meet all of these goals. International students don't

have the option of financial aid to cover extended years of schooling. Failing a class has some serious ramifications. If I receive a failing grade on a class then my scholarship can be revoked and without the scholarship I won't be able to pay for and attend school which in turn would make my visa status void.

This comment reflects the importance of maintaining international students' scholarships to recruit and retain international students. As a policy matter, UNO might want to consider the impact financial aid has on students' expectations of the institution. Finally, Anderson's group discussed the importance of parental influence and students' desire to meet parental expectations. International students at UNO do not place much emphasis on parents, while they place much on their own academic aspirations.

The research I gathered in this study did not support Fuligni's findings regarding students with different backgrounds adjusting differently, as many UNO students did not mention having their backgrounds conflict with their adjustment. In addition, it would appear that language did not present a barrier to adjustment, and when asked about language, international students responded that they had learned the English language prior to arriving to UNO in order to be able to compete with the domestic students.

My study did not indicate that parental influence was as high an influence as that found in Fuligni's study. Rather it seems that UNO fosters an environment of self-sufficiency that students quickly learn to adapt to. This self-sufficiency was also evident from the students' responses pertaining to academic achievement through grades. The majority of students felt that their grades reflected their own efforts. In contrast to Fuligni's findings, my study revealed no significant differences between international and domestic students' academic performances at UNO, both perceived as well as realized. Specifically, regarding the types of grades received, 39

percent of international students reported receiving excellent grades, while domestic students reported 34 percent.

Kaufman's research regarding the type of academic programs that help immigrant students adjust to a new community was partially supported by the results I obtained from my study. Although there is no common program that international students participate in to help them adjust to UNO, the correlation chart indicates that students feel there is an important relationship between successful adjustment and academic programs. As a result, students join programs that consist of members with common interests, much like Kaufman's research indicates. Furthermore, both international and domestic students feel it is important for professors to engage and challenge students in their classrooms, similar to Kaufman's research. Finally, UNO students recognize that failure is a result of their lack of effort, much like what Kaufman highlights in her study. In contrast to Kaufman's research, however, both international and domestic students feel they are provided equal opportunities at UNO. Whether or not expectations are met is determined by students, without the institutions' influence.

Finally, UNO international students' major preferences are similar to Douglas and Thompson's research on immigrant students preferring courses that would lead to successful job placements and most merit. Students hoped to obtain a degree in majors they thought were more popular or recognizable by the general public, among them Biology, Engineering, and Business. Douglas and Thompson's research indicated students chose these majors because of their perceived or potential merit and success within the job market after their completion. The differences in facility of transition for students from European backgrounds versus those of Asian backgrounds were not evident in my research because my sample of international students from Europe at UNO was not statistically significant.

Generally speaking, despite what previous research indicates, I found no significant correlation between what international students expected to obtain academically at UNO and what they actually received. Further, I found no significant difference between the international and domestic students' experiences: both felt that their own lack of effort accounted for failure and that UNO failed to provide opportunities that would allow them to succeed. Additionally, the fact that students feel that their success could be attributed to their own efforts indicated that UNO is highly effective in nurturing self-sufficiency in students. Meaning, even though students feel UNO encourages success with its academic curriculum, students feel it is ultimately up to them to achieve their goals. As a result, students responded that meeting their academic expectations is particularly important because they follow the paths they create, and hence can make alterations when they deem them as necessary. Another important deduction I made from the research is that international students who choose UNO or any other international institution know that they will have to adjust to the new setting to successfully compete with domestic students. This is evident from the comments regarding language, meaning students anticipated adjustment to their classrooms and thus prepared accordingly. Thus, this explains why international students' feel that the adjustment to UNO is merely "slight."

LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations which might have impacted my evaluation of the international student populations' academic experience at UNO. Among these are potential bias, time constraints, lack of understanding, and sample size. Although I attempted to eliminate potential bias, students may have been prompted to answer questions about UNO in a positive way for fear of being stigmatized as a result of negative responses. In addition, assumptions regarding what I wanted my study to produce could have prompted some students to answer

dishonestly. This distorted the information that I received, and as a result, the correct assessment of international students' experiences. In addition to bias, the time constraints I was under during the study prevented the attainment of sufficient data. The respondents also were under time constraints. Some students I asked to participate in the study frequently stated that schoolwork and work obligations prevented them from promptly answering the survey questions. Many international students reported having jobs to pay for their expenses, which demonstrates the independence and lack of significant financial support from the international students' parents. This interfered with my research process as I had to make multiple requests for responses. A number of students who promised me responses did not deliver at the end of my four month research period. Another potential limitation of the study was that some students did not understand the questions being asked. I offered clarification when necessary, but it might not have helped in some cases. As a result, students responded to the best of their ability, and sometimes did not provide useful responses because they could not understand the questions. Finally, the most important limitation of my research is the sample size I acquired. Even though I distributed 404 surveys, only 39 percent of the surveys were returned completed. Combined with the time restraints, I could not obtain a sufficiently representative sample of both the international and domestic student population. However, I was able to make deductions and draw on similar responses regarding the University of New Orleans.

IMPLICATIONS

Although the results obtained by my research were limited, they can provide a basis for future research regarding UNO, as well as the future influence and outreach UNO could have on the international student community. In addition, comparisons among the various public and private institutions of higher education in the area could be conducted to determine the factors

that help international students adjust, and to see if they are similar to those emphasized in my research. Further, a small group of student respondents indicated that the failure of UNO to meet their expectations was due to the recent budget cuts by the University. Future research could potentially expand on these statements and study the widespread effect the budget cuts have on this and future student populations.

REFERENCES

- Aliabad, Saravenaz, Scott C. Silverman, and Michelle R. Stiles. "Meeting the Needs of Commuter, Part- Time, Transfer, and Returning Students." *Student Engagement in Higher Education*. Ed. Shaun R. Harper and Ed. Stephen John Quayle. New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2009. 223-241.
- Anderson, Gregory, Karen Y. Carmichael, Todd J. Harper, and Tzufang Huang. "International Students at Four-Year Institutions." *Student Engagement in Higher Education*. Ed. Shaun R. Harper and Ed. Stephen John Quayle. New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2009. 17-37.
- Darcy, Maria U.A., J. Jeffries McWhirter, and Peter C. Tomich. "Personality and International Students' Adaptation Experience." *International Education*. 33. Fall (2003): 22-39.
- Douglass, John, and Gregg Thomson. "The Immigrant's University: A Study of Academic Performance and the Experiences of Recent Immigrant Groups at the University of California." *Higher Education Policy*. 2010: 451-474.
- Fuligni, Andrew J. "The Academic Achievement of Adolescents from Immigrant Families: The Roles of Family Background, Attitudes, and Behavior." *Child Development*. 68.2 (1997): 351-363.
- Greenman, Emily. "Assimilation Choices Among Immigrant Families: Does School Context Matter?" *International Migration Review*. 45.1 (2011): 29-67.
- Hser, May P. "Campus Internationalization: A Study of American Universities' Internationalization Efforts." *International Education*. 35. Fall (2005): 35-48.
- Kaufman, Julia. "The Interplay Between Social and Cultural Determinants of School Effort and Success: An Investigation of Chinese- Immigrant and Second- Generation Chinese Students' Perceptions Toward School." *Social Science Quarterly*. 85.5 (2004): 1275-1298.
- Song, Steve. "Finding One's Place: Shifting Ethnic Identities of Recent Immigrant Children from China, Haiti, and Mexico in the United States." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. 33.6 (2010): 1006-1031.

TABLE 1- SURVEY

UNO Students' Academic Experiences

- 1. I was born in**
 - a. The U.S.
 - b. Outside the U.S.
- 2. At UNO, I am registered as a(n)_____student**
 - a. Domestic
 - b. International
- 3. If registered as a domestic student, are you a**
 - a. U.S. citizen
 - b. Permanent resident
 - c. Temporary resident
 - d. Other _____
- 4. If registered as an international student, do you intend to _____**
 - a. Stay in the U.S.
 - b. Return to your native country
- 5. What is your ethnicity?**

- 6. How long have you been attending UNO?**
 - a. Less than a year
 - b. 1-2 years
 - c. 2-3 years
 - d. 4 or more years
- 7. What academic expectations did you have about UNO before arriving here?**

- 8. Who influenced you the most to come to UNO?**
 - a. Parents
 - b. Teacher
 - c. Yourself
 - d. Other _____
- 9. If answered parents in Question 8, what is the level of influence this person(s) had on your decision?**
 - a. Some
 - b. Moderate
 - c. Significant
- 10. How much effort do you put into school work?**
 - a. Some
 - b. Moderate
 - c. Significant
- 11. What is your overall impression of the academic atmosphere UNO creates?**

- 12. Do you participate in any after school academic programs? List all that apply.**

- 13. How important are these programs to you?**
a. Not important
b. Somewhat important
c. Very important
- 14. How would you perceive your involvement in these programs as helping you adjust to UNO?**
a. It does not
b. To some extent
c. To a large extent
- 15. How would you perceive your adjustment so far?**
a. No adjustment
b. Minor adjustment
c. Major adjustment
- 16. Do you feel that afterschool academic programs aid in this adjustment?**
a. Yes
b. No
- 17. If the answer to question 16 is no, please list programs that have helped.**

- 18. What kind of grades do you strive for?**
a. Below Average
b. Average
c. Above Average
d. Excellent
- 19. What kind of grades have you received?**
a. Below Average
b. Average
c. Above Average
d. Excellent
- 20. Do you feel your grades thus far and on average reflect your efforts?**
a. Yes
b. No
- 21. If no, state the reasons why this is the case.**

- 22. How important do you feel your expectations needed to be met?**
a. Not important
b. Somewhat important
c. Very important
- 23. If your answer to question 22 is very important, would your goals be different and how?**

- 24. Would you be willing to be contacted for further questioning?**
a. Yes
b. No
- 25. If yes, please leave contact information.**

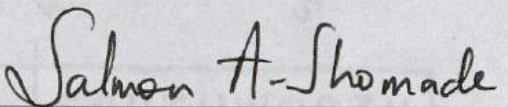
Email Address _____

Phone (Optional) _____

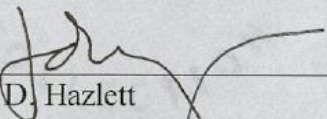
APPROVAL SHEET

This is to certify that Fahreta Muminovic has successfully completed
her Senior Honors Thesis, entitled:

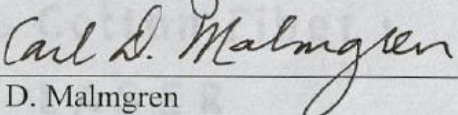
*Perception versus Reality:
Assessing the Academic Experiences of the UNO Immigrant Community*



Salmon A. Shomade Director of Thesis



John D. Hazlett for the Department



Carl D. Malmgren for the University
Honors Program

April 30, 2012
Date