

# Social Integration and Academic Outcomes: The Case of an International Public Policy and Management Program

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, we use survey data from an international public policy and management program within a large private U.S. university to study sociocultural and academic adjustment of the students, how this is affected by the structure of the program, and its effects on their academic performance. We focus on factors that affect students' ability to socially integrate successfully during their time in the United States for higher education and attempt to determine if this social integration translates into better academic outcomes.

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Increasing globalization has wide-ranging effects on educational programs and student recruitment for higher education. Universities are a microcosm of global changes. It has become common to have large numbers of international students in universities across the United States. Leading universities are recognizing the importance of designing effective programs for international students (Yergin, 2002). International students as a percent of all students enrolled in higher education in the United States has increased from 2.8% in 1985 to 3.9% in 2007, and international student enrollment in the United States increased by 3.2% from 2006 to 2007 (IIE, 2007). International students make valuable economic contributions to U.S. universities; the net contribution to the U.S. economy by

foreign students and their families in 2006–2007 was \$14.5 billion (IIE, 2007), and they also contribute educationally by adding diversity to U.S. campuses.

Further, international students in American universities also act as ambassadors of American culture and values when they go back to their native countries. International students play leading roles in their areas of work and also have influential roles in their respective countries and thus drive public opinion about the American culture and living in different countries around the world (Chen, 1950; Sandhu, 1994).

A number of challenges are involved in the design and management of programs to effectively serve a growing segment of international student populations at U.S. universities. International students on U.S. campuses face unique problems when compared to domestic students. They encounter both academic and social adjustment difficulties (Senyshyn, Warford, & Zhan, 2000; Tomich, McWhirter, & Darcy, 2003). The academic system in the United States is new and sometimes confusing to these students, and language and communication issues can also create academic adjustment problems (Andrade, 2006). Students are expected to communicate and write according to the norms and views of American faculty members, and these may not necessarily be the views they were raised with; hence, they face frustration and adjustment difficulties (Trice & Yoo, 2007). In addition, students are far from their families and homes and so are unable to use this support system effectively.

Students from parts of the world where English is not the first language are forced to communicate in and learn English while studying in the United States (Collier & Powell, 1990; Johnson, 1997). Additionally, they must adapt to a new social culture with demands that sometimes compete with their own values and academic needs (Ladd & Ruby, 1999; Luzio-Lockett, 1998; Myburgh, Niehaus, & Poggenpoel, 2002). Universities in different countries display wide differences in educational styles. These differences in values are deeply rooted in the social and cultural characteristics of the nations in which they are located and operate (Kragh & Bislev, 2005). The transition issues faced by students when they move from one level of education to the other, such as from undergraduate to graduate education, are heightened for international students on U.S. campuses because they confront difficulties in adjusting to a new technique and culture of education. Most of these students have attended universities and schools that emphasize learning through passive classroom teaching, delivery of content through straight lectures, and rote memorization (Jochems, Snippe, Smid, & Verweu, 1996). On the other hand, education in U.S. universities emphasizes applied learning, discussions, group exercises, active debate and reasoning, and out-of-class learning through projects, research, and problem solving.

To maximize the benefits of having international students on campus, it is important for the universities that recruit international students to ensure a system structured to meet the special needs of an international student body.

Both well-structured and targeted social integration activities and a curriculum designed specifically for international students may enhance the social and learning experiences of international students on U.S. campuses. Further, international students need help to learn how to apply concepts learned in classrooms to situations that they might face in their own work environment when they return home.

This paper examines a master's degree program within a large private U.S. university that is comprised mainly of international students. The university recruits international students in high numbers from across the globe and has some programs that solely focus on providing education to international students. The program studied in this paper has a curriculum designed specifically to meet the needs of an international student body. In addition, the program organizes activities that are particularly aimed at helping to ensure the sociocultural integration of students. A survey, along with supplemental data, was used to identify and explore social integration issues by international students and to assess the effectiveness of the program in facilitating sociocultural integration of the international students and to examine whether successful integration translates into better academic outcomes.

#### DESCRIPTION OF THE PROGRAM

The program being studied offers an intensive master's degree in International Public Policy and Management (IPPAM). The curriculum is designed to meet the needs of participants mainly from Pacific Rim countries and U.S. students who wish to work in the Pacific Rim. Customized courses identify critical problems in the Asian region and provide participants with the managerial and analytical expertise to design, implement, and evaluate policies and programs that address these problems. The 13-month master's degree in public policy and management is designed for participants working in the social sectors: health, population planning, urban and regional planning, education, communication, and nonprofit management. Students in the program come from a wide range of cultural backgrounds and academic interests. Most students have previous work experience in the public sector, while others have achieved positions in private companies or nonprofit organizations. Each year, approximately 40 students enroll in the program.

#### *Targeted Supplemental Instruction in the Program*

Targeted social and academic support is provided to international students to help them overcome their initial adjustment issues. Research has shown that universities that recruit international students should provide better support and additional opportunities for international students to enhance their learning experience (Harmon, 2003; Kennedy, Rushdi, & Willis, 2000; Kyvik, Karseth, & Blume, 1999; Trice & Yoo, 2007). Based on this concept, the program offers services designed to enhance the opportunity for academic success, the development of applied skills, and enjoyment of cultural and recreational activities in the

United States. The program enables students to learn about the issues in their countries by using data and research from their own countries. It embraces a global perspective to meet the needs of international students with a focus on the social sectors and the intersection of government, business, and social services.

*Preparation, review, lecture, and application model.* Small study groups, facilitated by a doctoral student, are organized in conjunction with the core courses to provide participants an opportunity to review and apply material for each class. The study groups first review and discuss in advance the material that will be covered in an upcoming lecture. These pre-lecture sessions, or prep sessions, not only force the students to read course materials and be prepared for the class but also give them a chance to discuss other problems that they might face such as language barriers and minor concept-related issues. Next, students attend the lecture. Finally, a review session is conducted and attended by all students from different countries, where the material for the week is discussed and applied to their home countries.

*Group projects.* The program incorporates several group projects into the core courses each semester. These projects require considerable academic discussion. This program utilizes doctoral students who function as teaching assistants (TAs) to mentor students and guide small groups through the process of completing several large projects throughout the year. The TAs also provide guidance and feedback on student theses. The TA-student interactions provide an opportunity for students to formulate and articulate their thoughts, debate with others, build critical reasoning skills, and learn how to persuade others.

*Academic enrichment activities.* Academic enrichment activities organized by the program include seminars with prominent speakers from students' home countries, seminars sponsored by other programs within the university, or outside organizations (e.g., public policy think tanks, the Asia Society), conferences, and symposiums within and outside the university campus, and meetings with foreign government officials visiting the program for short-term training.

#### *Targeted Logistical and Social Integration Activities*

A program staff team is organized to help incoming students upon arrival to arrange airport pickup, conduct an apartment search, open a bank account, apply for a cell phone and a driving license, purchase a car, and coordinate spouse or dependent issues. In addition a central international student office within the university offers these services and guidance throughout the academic year. A mentor-mentee system has been set up by the program in which volunteers from the current student body work as mentors for incoming students to prepare and guide them through the sociocultural and academic issues as well as resource search techniques. These mentee-mentor relationships sometimes extend much beyond the graduate student tenure and help the students in building social and professional networks. Students also have an opportunity to be a part of a seven-member student senate organization. This senate consists of members

from different nationalities and is responsible for organizing academic and social events, sports and recreational activities, career placement meetings, and student activity event announcements. After graduation, this student senate also helps coordinate alumni activities.

The program arranges for social enrichment activities of interest within the school or campus in the Los Angeles area and some even outside Los Angeles. Activities are designed to facilitate social integration and team building; they may include museum visits, picnics, team-based sporting events such as basketball and volleyball, recreational sports such as skiing, participative performance events such as an annual talent show, and networking events such as social get-togethers with local alumni to exchange career advice and other social events with staff and students. The program also schedules joint activities with other international programs on campus, such as master's degree programs for international business students or international law students.

#### STUDY OBJECTIVES

In this paper, we use survey data from an international public policy and management program within a large private U.S. university to study sociocultural and academic adjustment of the students, how this is affected by the structure of the program, and its effects on their academic performance. We focus on factors that affect students' ability to socially integrate successfully during their time in the United States for higher education and attempt to determine if this social integration translates into better academic outcomes. Previous literature has primarily focused on academic and psychosocial stressors, learning styles, and social adaptation of international students. Earlier studies of international students found academic stress to be a function of cultural distance, self-perceived English-language skills, students' social support network, academic and problem-solving skills, and role competencies (Johnson & Burdett, 2010; Wan, Chapman, & Biggs, 1992).

Our study explores factors that encourage or inhibit social and academic adjustment among international students and determines whether they are interrelated. We based the conceptual background of our study on previous work in intercultural communication competence (Lewthwaite, 1996; Redmond & Bunyi, 1993), which is seen as a composite of communication skills, knowledge of host culture, language competence, adaptation (mainly determined by interpersonal flexibility, adapting to different points of view, suspending judgments, and the like), communication effectiveness, and social integration (ability to initiate assimilation into the social or relational network). Study findings should be relevant to schools that heavily recruit international students for advanced education and also have potential education policy implications for the U.S. education system, which is increasingly involved in dealing with and teaching for a diverse and international group of students at various levels of education.

#### DATA AND METHODS

Our core data come from a survey administered to two cohorts of students in the program ( $N = 90$ ). A total of 84 students completed the survey, for a 93% response rate. Students were asked to complete the survey after they had been in the program for approximately 10 months. The survey included a wide range of questions regarding each student's social interaction and integration and their academic experiences during their time in the program. The response range for most questions was from 1 through 7, where 1 indicates "strongly disagree" and 7 indicates "strongly agree." As part of the survey, students were asked questions about their social and academic experience at the university, their previous cross-cultural experiences, if they had lived in countries other than their home country, and if they attended international schools. Previous studies have reported on obstacles to integration as being loneliness, mismatch of culture, and irritation with aspects of their host culture; they identified the greatest block to adaptation as the lack of intercultural communicative competence (Lewthwaite, 1996). To assess student's social integration during their time in the program, students were asked if they had problems in making friends, if they experienced loneliness while in the United States, and if they made friends with American students and students from other countries; they were also asked to share their perceptions about making international friends and forming networks. Some of the questions were repeated with different time frames (at the beginning of the program and 6 months later) to measure changes over time. For example, students were asked how easy it was for them to make friends when they first entered the program and then again after they had been in the program for 6 months. They were also asked questions on other issues such as motivation and study habits, academic acculturation, reasons for applying and pursuing education at this particular program, and availability of academic support, orientation, and a web-based instruction system.

The survey data were supplemented with data drawn from admissions and enrollment data records and included variables such as country of origin, background information from student applications such as each students' prior international exposure, undergraduate grade point average (GPA), Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) scores, and graduate education academic outcome as measured by final GPA upon graduation from a program. These different data sets were merged into a single analysis file using student ID numbers; student names were deleted. TOEFL scores were used as a measure of the students' English-language proficiency. All data sets were merged to measure social integration and academic performance, and they were analyzed using a combination of descriptive, correlation, and multivariate regression analyses. Depending on which variables are being analyzed, the sample size ranges from 80 to 90, since not all students answered all questions on the survey.

RESULTS

*Sample Characteristics*

Table 1 presents the breakdown of the sample of students based on their countries of origin and selected characteristics. For presentation purposes, students from different countries are grouped based on similarity of culture and/or language or economic development of their home country. Most of the students report

Table 1.  
*Characteristics Students Included in the Survey*

<b>Country</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Taiwan/ China</b>	<b>Korea/ Japan</b>	<b>Indonesia/ Thailand</b>	<b>U.S./Canada Permanent Residents</b>
Students (No.)	90	50	9	13	18
Students (%)	100%	56%	10%	14%	20%
Visited other countries*	82%	90%	89%	46%	83%
Lived in other countries*	40%	28%	33%	46%	72%
Studied in international school*	22%	18%	33%	31%	22%
One parent worked in other countries*	19%	18%	11%	46%	6%
Worked for a public policy organization*	68%	72%	44%	92%	50%
Worked in a management position*	50%	48%	33%	77%	44%
TOEFL average score*	580	579	578	611	623

\* This information relates to before starting graduate studies at the program of study.

coming from a broad mix of Pacific Rim countries (80%). In fact, this percentage is higher since many of the students coded as permanent residents or U.S. citizens actually resided outside of the United States for all or most of their lives before entering the program. However, more than 80% of students have either lived in or visited other countries before starting their graduate education in the United States, which should contribute to their easier adjustment to a new culture. However, only 20% of the students have attended an international school before starting their graduate education, which provides an indicator of the degree of academic culture and transition issues that most of the students might experience when they first enter a completely new system of education.

Table 2 shows the distribution of survey responses related to selected program characteristics designed to improve communication skills and learning style.

Table 2.  
*Program Structure, Social Integration, and Learning Effectiveness (N = 84)*

	<b>Agree</b>
<b>Study Groups and Group Projects</b>	
Working on group assignments helped me make friends.	82%
Doing group work motivates me to work harder.	73%
Interacting with other international students has helped improve my English.	73%
I feel I can communicate in English much better than when I first joined IPPAM.	68%
I feel that I haven't had the chance to meet students in other programs because IPPAM students take too many classes together.	76%
After graduation, I hope to stay in contact with the friends I made at IPPAM.	92%
<b>Classroom Discussion and Program Rigor</b>	
Participating in class discussions helps students learn more.	87%
My learning style has improved since coming to IPPAM.	73%
I can get a good grade on the tests, even if I do not attend all the classes.	23%

Many studies have shown that communication effectiveness, perceived communication effectiveness, and language competence are important determinants of students' ability to socially integrate and overcome cross-cultural barriers (Redmond & Bunyi, 1993; Wan et al., 1992). Most of the students felt better about their communication skills, especially in English; felt that group work and class participation helps them learn more; and felt confident about their ability to work in groups or with other students. However, most of the students also felt that they take too many classes together with other international students, which constrains them from interacting with other students in the school. These findings provide some guidance for curriculum and program design.

Earlier studies on social integration in different contexts, such as international ethnic communities, international students, and disabled students and individuals, have by definition focused on friendship networks as measures of social integration that in turn are interrelated with social competence, social support, and interpersonal characteristics (Haring & Breen, 1992). Socially integrated students should feel less lonely, more confident about their presence in the American society, and able to make friends relatively easily, especially after spending a few months in the United States.

Table 3 provides survey findings related to social interaction when students first enter the program and how they felt after 6 months in the program. In general, after 6 months in the program students were less dependent on their friends back home and had become more integrated into the social framework of the university. However, one-fifth of students still experienced loneliness and felt "looked down upon" by Americans when they took the survey after 6 months in the program.

Table 3.  
*Isolation and Social Interaction Over Time (N = 84)*

	<b>Start of Program</b>	<b>After 6 Months</b>
	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>
I experienced much loneliness while at USC.	28%	20%
I found it easy to make friends at USC.	64%	80%
I missed my friends in my home country.	63%	43%
I feel that Americans look down on me because I am a foreigner.	NA	22%

*Program Structure, Social Integration, and Academic Performance*

To explore each student's academic performance in the graduate program (graduate GPA), we developed a multivariate regression model to regress graduate GPA on factors that involved their previous academic standing (undergraduate GPA) and fluency in English language (TOEFL score) as well as other factors that were a direct or indirect measure of social integration (such as ability to make friends), previous cross-cultural experiences, and social isolation (such as feelings of loneliness), to mention a few. Table 4 provides the results of multivariate regression to explore the relationship between academic performance and various student and program characteristics. Several of the factors in the model are statistically significant. The largest statistically significant and positive coefficient in the model relates to previous cross-cultural experience in the form of visiting other countries before starting their graduate education in the United States and is associated with a 0.19-point increase in graduate GPA. Undergraduate GPA was also positive and significantly associated with a higher graduate GPA. Surprisingly, the TOEFL score had no significant relationship to academic performance.

As to the relationship between social isolation and integration, one interesting finding relates to the role of ease of making friends while at school. Students who found it easy to make friends in the program had a higher overall graduate GPA (0.087 higher) while students who found it easy to make friends outside the program and in the broader student community tended to have significantly lower GPA scores. These findings suggest countervailing forces. Students who are able to make friends easily and socially integrate within the program have a better academic outcome; those making friends with American students and students outside the program had lower GPAs. This latter finding suggests that being too involved in social activities and in mixing with other students competes with students' time for academic activities and hence predicts a lower GPA (−0.168 points).

Another factor that has a statistically significant relationship with graduate academic outcomes is lack of family encouragement for academic achievement (−0.099 points). Interestingly, most students in the program have financial support from their family; but some students are under pressure to finish quickly and return home to family businesses. Thus, there is financial support but not support for academic achievement. This finding suggests that students who receive little or no academic encouragement from family members tend to perform lower academically. Another interesting finding is a small, negative effect of English-language competency (measured as TOEFL score) on academic outcomes. The effect is very small; and though it is significant, it is contrary to what earlier studies have found regarding English-speaking competency and academic achievement. Previous research has suggested that better English proficiency leads to better academic outcomes for international students in U.S. universities (Kaspar, 1997). Finally, Table 4 also shows some other factors that we theorized to have an effect on academic outcomes but that had no statistically significant relationship with academic performance.

Table 4.

*Multivariate Regression Analysis of Graduate GPA (dependent variable is graduate GPA; N = 84)*

<b>Graduate GPA</b>	<b>Coeff.</b>	<b>Std. Err.</b>	<b><i>P</i> &gt; <i>t</i></b>	<b>[95% Conf.</b>	<b>Interval]</b>
<b>Academic and International Experience</b>					
Undergraduate GPA	0.197	0.094	0.04	0.01	0.39
TOEFL Score	-0.002	0.001	0.07	0.00	0.00
Previous cross-cultural experiences (visited other countries)	0.315	0.152	0.04	0.01	0.62
Friends and family think I am foolish to study in U.S.	0.050	0.042	0.24	-0.03	0.13
Lack of academic encouragement from family	-0.099	0.046	0.03	-0.19	-0.01
<b>Social Integration and Isolation</b>					
Found it easy to make friends	0.087	0.044	0.05	0.00	0.17
Easily made friends with American and students outside the program	-0.168	0.053	0.00	-0.27	-0.06
Experienced much loneliness while in U.S.	0.053	0.058	0.36	-0.06	0.17
Group work and good grades motivate me to work harder	-0.038	0.047	0.42	-0.13	0.06
Missed friends in home country while in U.S.	-0.029	0.065	0.66	-0.16	0.10
Feel that Americans look down upon me	0.006	0.028	0.83	-0.05	0.06
Constant	3.472	0.566	0.00	2.34	4.60

These include feelings of loneliness while in the United States, motivation to work harder through group work or good grades, missing friends in the home country, and feeling that Americans look down on them.

#### DISCUSSION

Our study empirically confirms some but not all previous findings about international student academic and social performance in U.S. universities. Even though we do reinforce some of the findings of previous research in this area, our study has some new findings that can potentially be helpful to international students as well as educational policy makers.

Consistent with the literature, we find that a substantial portion of students tend to face some form of sociocultural integration issues as reflected by their ability or inability to make friends and their perception of themselves from the American point of view. Students who have visited other countries and have supportive families tend to feel less isolated because they are more likely to be competent in cross-cultural communication due to their prior experiences. Our finding expands on other studies that have reported on obstacles to integration as being loneliness, mismatch of culture, and lack of intercultural communicative competence (Lewthwaite, 1996). On the other hand, students who feel that other students don't want to work with them or that faculty look down on them, as well as those who face pressure from their families to join their family business after graduation, are more likely to be socially isolated and make friends with people of their own nationality. Also, students who attend social activities and perceive greater benefits from them and who feel that their English proficiency has improved over time during graduate education tend to be more socially integrated.

Previous cross-cultural experiences such as visiting other countries had a strong and positive effect on academic outcomes. In addition, making more American friends had a slightly negative effect on academic outcomes, even though the ability to make friends had a positive effect. This suggests that cross-cultural experiences during the time of higher education in U.S. universities for international students do not entirely translate into better academic performance, even though previous studies have found international students' academic stress to be a function of cultural distance, self-perceived English language skills, students' social support network, academic and problem-solving skills, and their role competencies (Wan et al., 1992). We also found that previous academic standing, which was measured as undergraduate GPA, is the second most important positive predictive factor for graduate academic performance.

Interestingly, the results related to family and social support for studying in the United States worked in conflicting ways. For example, the multivariate results show that students whose family and/or friends did not encourage their education in the United States actually tended to have a higher GPA. It may be that students worked harder to prove to their family and friends that the investment in a

U.S. education was worth it. Conversely, students whose family did not support their continued academic training at the master's level had lower GPAs ( $-0.09$ ), suggesting that the role of family support of continued academic training is an important factor in determining how students will perform. These students may have been under pressure to work in family businesses in their home countries, and perhaps this was a constant concern while they were away studying.

Somewhat surprisingly, the most important factor explaining student academic performance in the program was their prior experience in visiting other countries before beginning their educational experience in the United States. Further research is needed to better understand how this factor influences performance. It may be that prior international travel makes the adjustment to living and studying in the United States easier, providing less logistical and emotional drag on students and their ability to focus on academic achievement. Another interesting set of findings concerns the effects of isolation and integration on academic performance in the program. Students who made more friends outside the program had much lower GPAs ( $-0.19$ ) after controlling for other factors, while students who felt lonely and isolated after 6 months in the program actually had higher GPAs. Again, more research is needed to better understand these dynamics. It may be that students with outside friends have more competition for their time and so spend less time studying and preparing for class. On the other hand, interaction with a broader set of friends may result in an even broader education for these students.

#### LIMITATIONS

Our study is limited by the sample, which includes two cohorts of the program being studied. A larger sample might provide the basis for more detailed statistical analysis. The TOEFL test score has been used as the measure of English-language proficiency. However, it is not clear whether this test measures the qualities necessary to complete a course of study in a foreign language successfully, because it does not measure all possible aspects of proficiency in a foreign language (Jochems et al., 1996). This, however, was the best available objective score for the English-language competency for our study subjects. We suggest the development of a more comprehensive measure in order to study English-language competency of foreign students.

#### CONCLUSION

In this study, we focus on two cohorts of graduate students in a U.S.-based international public policy and management program to explore issues related international student social isolation and integration and what programs features might do to improve student well-being and academic performance. Specifically, the program is designed to train international mid-career professionals and provides academic and social support to help students overcome the challenges that international students typically face in a new educational culture. We used

a survey as a tool to measure the success of the program and to study the social and academic integration factors for the students enrolled in this program, and we also studied social integration in relation to graduate academic outcome. Our study in many ways extends on previous research in this area and also has findings that require further in-depth analysis of international student experiences and success of programs in providing a well-rounded education.

We found that an important predictor of student well-being and academic performance in an international program is the students' prior exposure to international living and/or schooling. Students who have faced social and cultural challenges before appear to adapt better in an international graduate program. We found that providing structured work groups and team projects facilitated learning and improved English communication. We also found that students who participate in social events feel more socially integrated, and those who feel that their English proficiency has improved while in the program tended to be more socially integrated. These two findings together suggest that U.S. programs that serve international students can structure their programs in a way that facilitates both social integration and improved academic achievement. Specifically, programs that build in social events can help students feel more connected to the program and less isolated and also help them improve their English at the same time. It also appears that it may be valuable to provide supplementary English instruction, which helps students better integrate socially and also improves their academic performance. However, it is important to note that despite additional support, social activities, and better student-teacher and student-TA contact at the program, we found that a substantial number of students still face social adjustment challenges after 6 months in the program. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we find that social adjustment eventually affects academic outcomes.

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