

Improving Global Planning Education by Centering the Experience of International Students in U.S. and Canadian Planning Schools

Report Prepared by the ACSP Global Planning Education Committee

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Background

Planning as a discipline has a core interest in maximizing the well-being of all people in the context of ongoing global transformation of cities and regions (Amirahmadi, 1993). In her seminal paper on expanding the “language” of planning, Sandercock defined planning as an ethical inquiry (Sandercock, 1999). She suggested that the goal of planning education is not to focus on techniques and methods, but to ask the basic questions about values— “How might we live with each other in the multicultural cities and regions of the next century?”

With the hope of making their graduates better planetary citizens, U.S. and Canadian Planning Schools have increasingly incorporated global and multicultural perspectives into their courses and classrooms (Pezzoli and Howe, 2001; Sen 2000; Carolini 2018) and leveraged the presence of international students. Over the past two decades, the proportion of international master’s students in U.S. planning schools increased from 11% to 15% of the total planning student population (Carolini et al., 2019), although unequally distributed. It is widely acknowledged that international students bring cultural, technical, and socio-political perspectives that are indispensable for creating diverse and vibrant learning environments in U.S. planning schools (Chatterjee, 1990).

Despite their critical contribution to the mission of U.S. planning schools and the development of planning as a discipline, many international students face integration challenges, discrimination, and injustice in their academic pursuits and daily lives (Schulte & Choudaha, 2014). These stem from misunderstandings, lack of appreciation of cultural differences, and persistent sexism, racism, ethnocentrism, xenophobia, and anti-immigrant sentiments in sections of U.S. society. In addition, legal and regulatory constraints restrict international students’ eligibility for financial aid and work permits during graduate study as well as their work opportunities following graduation. There appears to be a paradox for global planning education: while planning schools have increasingly leveraged the presence of international students, many may not be providing holistically supportive environments for international students to achieve social, academic, and professional success.

In 2016, the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning (ACSP) established the ACSP Taskforce on Global Planning Education to “explore global education, focusing on issues of recruiting and engaging international students, international education and accreditation issues.” The taskforce reviewed and analyzed various data—including a review of past surveys conducted with international students in 2013, 2015, and 2017 by the ACSP Global Planning Educator’s Interest Group (GPEIG)—and published a report titled “Building Global Perspectives on Planning Education” in January 2019. The report identified globalizing the core curricula of planning schools as the top priority for supporting international students’ intellectual development,

including strategies to tap into the experience and knowledge of international students. The report also discussed the “hidden and less visible dimension” of international students’ experiences, including confusion over local norms, cultural shifts related to networking or asking for help, financial burdens, visa hurdles, and limited career (Carolini et al., 2019, p. 19).

Acting on the report by the ACSP Taskforce on Global Planning Education, ACSP President Weiping Wu instituted the ACSP Global Planning Education Committee (GPEC) at the 2019 ACSP Annual Conference in Greenville, South Carolina, October 24th-27th, where GPEC also held its inaugural meeting. GPEC’s charge is to prioritize and implement a set of activities to build on the recommendations laid out in the 2019 Taskforce report, which includes efforts to fully engage international students.

As one of the first steps to identify ways to better engage and support international students in U.S. planning schools, GPEC has begun outreach efforts to collect additional quantitative and qualitative data on the experience of international students in U.S. planning schools. This report summarizes the results of a survey and focus group discussions GPEC carried out in September-October 2021. It suggests strategies to improve international student experience in U.S. Planning Schools.

Online Survey and Focus Group Discussions

The online survey included three key questions about the study-abroad experience of current and recently graduated international students from U.S. undergraduate and graduate planning programs:

- How satisfied are/were you with your **learning experience** at your university? By learning experience, we mean your courses, faculty mentoring, and other training and development opportunities offered by your university.
- How satisfied are/were you with your **social life** at your university? By social life, we mean the support and opportunities that your university provides for you to build connections and form friendships.
- How satisfied are/were you with your **living experience** in the U.S. or Canada? By living experience, we mean your interactions with people in the broader community outside of the university.

In addition to the key questions above, the survey asked about student status, country of origin, name of the attended university, degree program, and whether the student is interested in three types of engagement activities that GPEC could facilitate, including participating in virtual listening sessions, building networks, and organizing sessions and workshops. The survey also asked the participants to provide any qualitative comments they liked to share.

The survey was sent to four email listservs, including the Global Planning Educator’s Interest Group (GPEIG), PLANETNEW, Ph.D. Planning Student Bowling League, and International Association of China Planning (IACP). The survey was also sent to the Chairs of all accredited

programs at the Planning Accreditation Board (PAB), including 78 master’s and 15 bachelor’s programs at 81 North American universities. The Chairs helped to distribute the survey among current and past international students in their programs.

A total of 187 international students responded to the survey, including 71% current students, 10% students who graduated in 2020-2021, and 19% students who graduated prior to 2020. As shown in Table 1, the majority of the participants (60%) are/were enrolled in Master’s programs. Forty six percent are/were Ph.D. students and only 6% of the participants are current or past students in Bachelor’s programs.

Table 1. Percentage distribution by student status and degree program (N=187)

Student Status Distribution (%)		Degree Program Distribution* (%)	
Current students	71	Bachelor's	6
Past students who graduated in 2020-2021	10	Master's	60
Past students who graduated prior to 2020	19	Ph.D.	46

Note:* There are students who have experienced multiple degree programs. The total % is higher than 100%.

The countries of origin among survey participants are diverse. Although the top 3 countries of origin are all Asian countries (i.e., China-31 participants, India-26 participants, and South Korea-11 participants), the sample includes 22 participants (12%) from countries in Latin America and 20 participants (11%) from countries in Africa. Overall, the survey participants are from 54 countries and have/had study abroad experiences in 45 universities in the U.S. and Canada. Note that students with experiences in Canadian universities are included for their similar cultural and environmental settings to U.S. universities.

Of the 187 survey participants, 33 provided qualitative comments in the survey. In addition, 146 participants provided an email address and indicated interest in additional engagement activities. The distribution of the survey participants by engagement activity type is shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Student interests in additional engagement activities (N=187)

Activities	# of Students (%)
Participating in an online virtual listening session	113 (60)
Building long-lasting networks such as email listservs and Facebook/LinkedIn groups	129 (69)
Organizing sessions and workshops at future ACSP annual conferences	118 (63)

Following the survey, students who provided their email addresses and indicated interests in additional engagement activities were invited to an online focus group session hosted by GPEC at the virtual 2021 ACSP Annual Conference on Thursday, October 21, 2021, 7-8:30 pm U.S. Central Time. ACSP provided the online meeting platform via Zoom and allowed students to participate in the focus group session without paying conference fees.

Altogether, 25 international students participated in the focus group session. These students

represented 13 countries: China, India, Nigeria, Ukraine, Bangladesh, Chile, Fiji, Ghana, Iran, Pakistan, Spain, Taiwan, and Turkey. The 90-minute session included a short presentation of the survey findings (15 minutes), a roundtable discussion among four invited panelists (30 minutes), focus group discussions among participating students in smaller breakout rooms (30 minutes), and a large-group reporting out (15 minutes). The 25 students were randomly assigned to five focus group breakout rooms, each with a moderator and a note-taker to facilitate discussion. The following questions were used in the focus group discussions:

- What strategies can planning programs and/or ACSP implement to leverage the identified opportunities or to address the challenges discussed?
- What can international students do as a group to lead and contribute to potential solutions?
- In your opinion, is there something at your school/program that, if done, or if done differently, could significantly improve the international student's experience?

Key Findings

This section summarizes six key findings from the survey and focus group discussions. In identifying key findings, we combined quantitative and qualitative data for a richer and more meaningful interpretation.

1. International students face structural barriers and need mentorship and connections in navigating these barriers.

The qualitative comments we received in the survey and focus group discussions collectively point to structural barriers faced by international students. These barriers are often institutional and cultural in nature. They suggest that the U.S. academic system can feel alienating and intimidating to many international students. Many are scared, hesitant or ashamed of asking for guidance, which may feel culturally inappropriate. The quote below illustrates such structural barriers and the lack of support from educators and administrators to overcome them:

“The US educational system, what is expected from students, and everything from social interaction with peers and professors, and the relationship with administrators, are too different from other countries, especially those in the Global South. I felt very disappointed so many times for things that could have gone differently if I had gotten guidance from the program administrators.”

Notes from the focus group discussions further indicate the importance of mentorship and connections when it comes to facing structural barriers. Figure 1 illustrates the most frequently mentioned words in focus group discussions. The four most frequently used words—“mentorship”, “help”, “connections”, and “issues”—are illustrated in orange color in the center of Figure 1.

identities in the U.S.? Are international students of color considered persons of color (POC) in the U.S.? If so, why do programs for POC tend to include only domestic students? Without good answers to these questions, international students are uncomfortable seeking or accessing resources and support.

These findings demonstrate the importance of specifically identifying and addressing the structural barriers faced by international students, and dedicating DEI resources or making explicit that such resources exist to support international students.

3. Career development for international students has been inadequate and unjust in U.S. planning schools.

Many students in the survey and focus group discussion pointed out that most planning schools do not provide adequate support for international students for employment and internship searches. Offering high-quality career development services for all students is an important part of higher education missions. Yet, such services often do not extend to or are inadequate for international students who are generally constrained to work solely on campus because of visa requirements but seek to secure career opportunities globally—inside and outside the U.S.

One of the focus group participants made a telling comment that, without adequate career development services for international students, U.S. planning schools seem exploitative if international students perceive being brought in for just for utilitarian purposes (e.g., serving as research assistants, increasing overall student enrollment and diversity, and increasing global reputation) and feel abandoned upon graduating. This student also felt that ACSP does the same, making little effort to continue engaging PhD students who become faculty outside of the US or Canada. Further, we even heard the case of one professor who felt discriminated by ACSP, claiming that four times his abstracts had been accepted for annual conference presentations when he was a PhD student at a US institution, but they were subsequently rejected four times after he had graduated and submitted those from non-US-Canadian institutions. As more and more universities leverage international students in promoting global competence and diversity among the general student population, it is morally important for these universities to dedicate resources to providing high-quality career development services for international students, and for ACSP to leverage the plurality of thought and global reach that internationally-based alumni offer.

4. International students are more satisfied with their learning experiences compared to their social and living experiences.

Figure 2 illustrates significant gaps in satisfaction ratings when comparing the learning experiences of international students with their social and living experiences. Among the three aspects of the study abroad experience (learning, social life, and living), international students experience much higher satisfaction with their learning experience than the other two. About

38% of survey participants were very satisfied with their learning experience; in contrast, only 25% were very satisfied with their social life or their living experience.

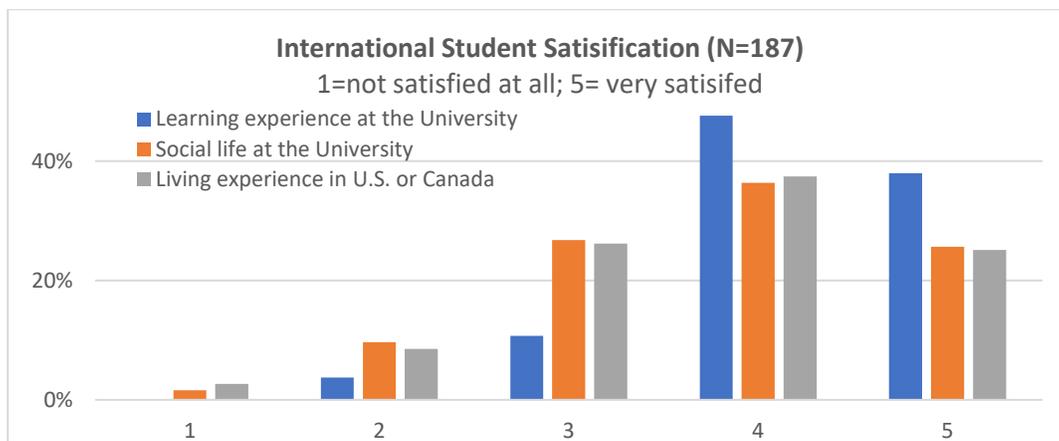


Figure 2. Percentage distribution of the responses to the three satisfaction questions

This discrepancy calls for planning programs to think more holistically about the entire international student experience. There is a strong need for universities and educators to think beyond the typical classroom and narrow curriculum realms for enriching student experience.

It is worth noting that, without looking into qualitative data, the satisfaction ratings in Figure 2 may appear to be high and may be interpreted as most students having good experiences. However, a significant number of students provided powerful and contrary qualitative comments, indicating a lack of educational support and lack of appreciation of the struggles that international students endure in navigating university systems.

Participants' qualitative comments also point to promising solutions in which the academic communities could play a significant role in offering a positive learning experience that can spill over to influence students' living/social experience. Referring to a positive experience at the University of Buffalo (UB), one of the survey participants provided the following comment:

“My experience at UB may be the exception. At the time when I enrolled to do my Masters, the School had an international student liaison faculty member who also ran a graduate class for all international students in the school that helped us acclimate while also pedagogically learning about why development looks so different in the US. I learned more in that class than perhaps my history of cities class.”

5. International student experience differs by student status, degree program, and country of origin.

Both survey and focus group discussion results show considerable variation in international student experiences. By using logit regression to analyze the survey data, we observed

statistically significant differences by student status, degree program, and country of origin:

- By student status: Current students and students who graduated in 2020-2021 are less satisfied with their social life compared to students who graduated prior to 2020.
- By degree program: Students in Bachelor's programs are less satisfied with their learning experience compared to students in master's and Ph.D. programs.
- By country of origin: Compared to other international students, students from India and South Korea reported being significantly less satisfied with their living experience in the U.S. or Canada.

The lower satisfaction levels among current students and students who graduated in 2020-2021 are likely related to the impacts of the COVID pandemic. Online teaching not only posed pedagogical challenges but also restricted social and life experiences for all, particularly for international students. The significant differences by degree program type and country of origin merit additional research. Its small sample size is a limitation of the survey. The lack of statistical significance in some of the country variables is also likely due to their small numbers. For example, qualitative data from focus group discussions suggest that students from countries with smaller populations studying abroad are more likely to face difficulties in identifying mentors and student networks.

6. Curriculum content in U.S. planning schools do not respond to the needs or leverage the perspectives of international students.

Despite indicating a generally high level of satisfaction with their learning experiences in the survey, those participants who offered qualitative comments in the survey and focus group discussions agreed that the curricula in U.S. planning schools do not serve international students well. A significant number of participants were concerned about the almost exclusive North American orientation in planning curricula and suggested that, whether foreign or domestic, this may "prevent students from learning different theories or perspectives". Many U.S. planning schools have traditionally focused almost exclusively on domestic training. Without changes, curricula have not responded to demands and needs of growing international student populations nor leveraged the diverse perspectives that international students bring to the classroom, as noted by one survey participant:

"University's urban planning department/schools and their curriculum could do more by looking at other global planning areas to both accommodate the international student (something to relate to) whilst exposing the domestic student to something different other than the same history of urban planning and US zoning codes."

Besides more international perspectives in course content, international students also need more basic background about the U.S. planning system, as one focus group participant expressed:

“We don’t know basics ...Brown vs. Board of Ed, Pruitt Igoe—monumental developments in planning that need to be understood [or] the language that gets thrown around and not understood; neither do students have the tools to interrogate ideas.”

Concluding Remarks

Despite their significant contribution to global planning education, international students in U.S. and Canadian planning schools face vulnerabilities and feel marginalized. Based on our findings, we recommend that planning schools and ACSP develop mentorship programs and networking platforms for international students to overcome institutional and cultural barriers, improve career development services oriented toward international students, include international students more actively in DEI efforts, and continue to globalize curricula by including international student perspectives and familiarizing international students with the historical context of U.S. planning.

Further, planning schools and ACSP need to think more holistically about improving international student experiences. As new arrivals, international students are challenged by the demands of a new educational system at the same time that they navigate life in a new society. Frustrations in their daily life can and do affect their ability to learn. Qualitative comments from our exploration suggest that it is hard to fully separate their educational experience from their living experiences. As such, planning programs and ACSP could help students develop social and communication skills, tap into peer mentoring and networking opportunities, and other strategies that could simultaneously improve their learning outcomes and overall life experiences.

Our findings echo many of the international student experiences described in the ACSP Taskforce on Global Planning Education’s 2019 report, suggesting that the challenges we found are widespread and persist. Still, it is worth noting that considerable variations exist across schools. Although many planning schools have not made dedicated efforts to address the needs of international students, some—as one student commented regarding the University of Buffalo—have had success in incorporating global content in their curricula and delivering mentorship programs oriented towards international students. Going forward, recognizing the variation and promoting knowledge sharing among planning schools may help to bridge the gaps and improve international experience overall.

Our survey also suggests that international student experiences differ by student status, degree program, and country of origin. Due to the limited scale of the survey and focus group efforts, this report does not fully uncover the diversity and variations in international student experience. Future data collection efforts could examine the important differences among international students across gender, English language ability, race and ethnic background, family income, and educational and career goals. Understanding and capturing the diversity of international student experiences will allow more nuanced approaches to address the needs of

international students.

In addition, our data collection and outreach efforts focused largely on graduate students. Future efforts may include undergraduate students in planning and related disciplines to identify their unique needs and challenges. To ensure broad engagement of international students in subsequent versions of the outreach effort, ACSP may consider collaborating with other academic and professional organizations interested in improving global planning education. For example, more undergraduate students, and Master's students in particular, interact with the American Planning Association, which has its own International Division with a mission to connect American planners to the world.

GPEC is also interested in coordinating with other ACSP committees, especially the Committee on Diversity, to develop and share resources that could improve the learning experiences across disadvantaged student populations, including international students, first-generation college students, and other BIPOC groups. Although international students face structural barriers that are particular to them as foreign-born immigrants, some solutions to mediate these structural barriers would likely also benefit other underrepresented groups. There is potential for international students to build alliances and to collaborate with other underrepresented groups to jointly address their structural barriers with common solutions.

Most critically, international students are themselves agents of change when it comes to transforming the prevailing culture and environment at planning schools. When addressing the structural barriers faced by international students, it is important to acknowledge, integrate, and nurture their creativity and agency. We hope this report reinforces the need for a much-needed conversation among planning students, educators, and administrators to improve the study abroad experiences for international students in U.S. and Canadian planning schools.

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