

Academic and Sociocultural Experiences of Students in Pathway Programs: Research Findings

2018 INTO North America Academic Conference

RESEARCH PURPOSE AND QUESTIONS

- This study reports on a longitudinal research project that was initiated in fall 2017 after the full launch of INTO WSU to (a) assess the first cohort of undergraduate and graduate pathway students' needs, academic and sociocultural expectations, and perceptions of academic success, (b) monitor their academic and sociocultural experiences in pathway programs, and (c) plan ways to enhance students' experience at INTO WSU based on the findings from this study. Specific research questions are:
 - What are the needs, academic and sociocultural expectations, and perceptions of academic success of pathway students at entry?
 - What are the sociocultural and learning experiences of international undergraduate and graduate pathway students in U.S. higher education?

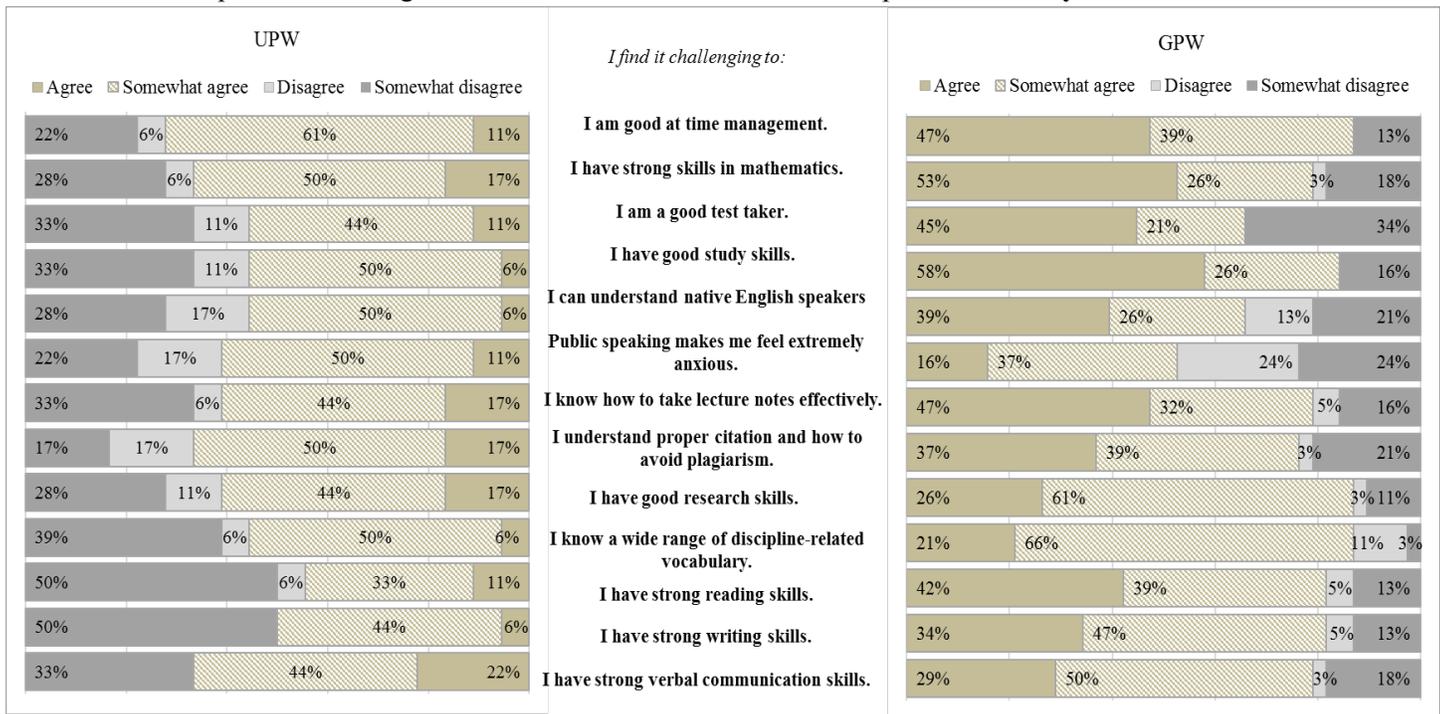
METHODOLOGY

- A descriptive research design was adopted to study "what" the academic and sociocultural experiences of international students in pathway programs in an American institution of higher education looked like.
- This research is also longitudinal in nature as data was collected from a cohort of participants at different times over two academic semesters using multiple instruments:

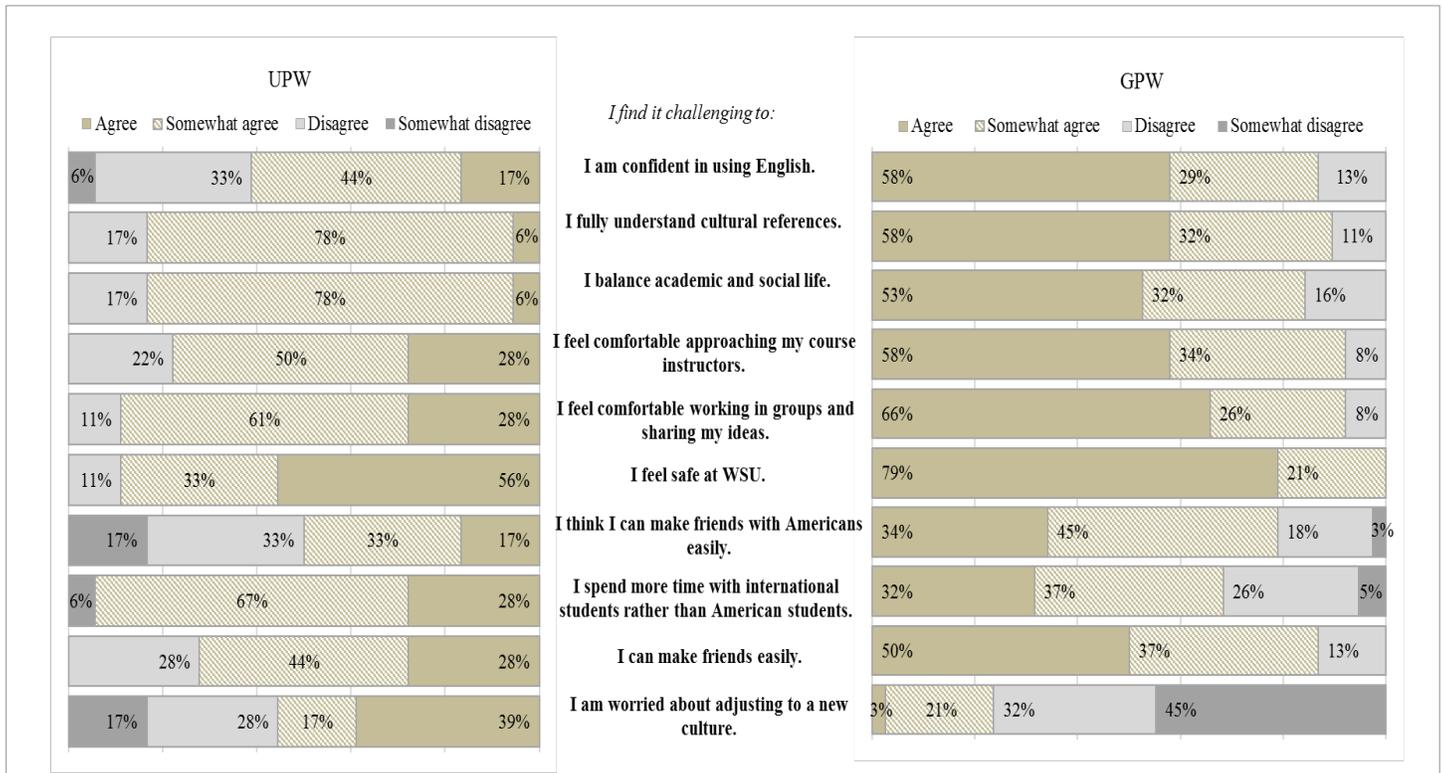
(a) <i>Needs Analysis Survey</i> => Beginning of Semester I (Fall 2017) n = 56 [UPW n = 18 & GPW n = 38]	(b) <i>Interviews</i> => Later in Semester I (Fall 2017) n = 40 [UPW n = 14 & GPW n = 26]	(c) <i>Follow-up Survey</i> Mid of Semester II (Spring 2018) n = 51 [UPW n = 15 & GPW n = 38]
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- Descriptive statistical and thematic analyses were used to analyze the data.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- Students' self-reported knowledge about their own L2 and academic competence **at entry**:



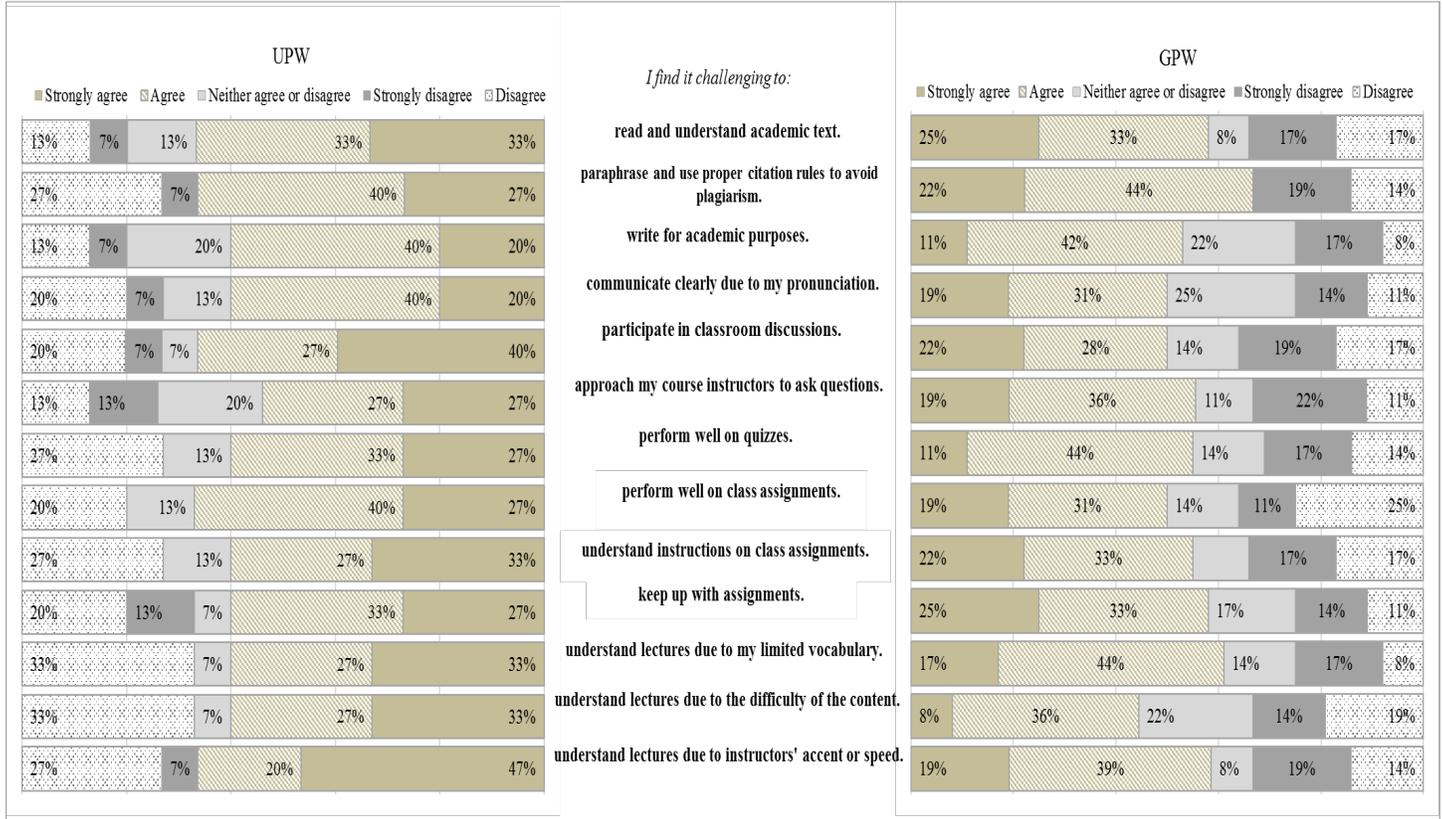
• Students’ perceptions towards personal and sociocultural aspects of their learning experience **at entry**:



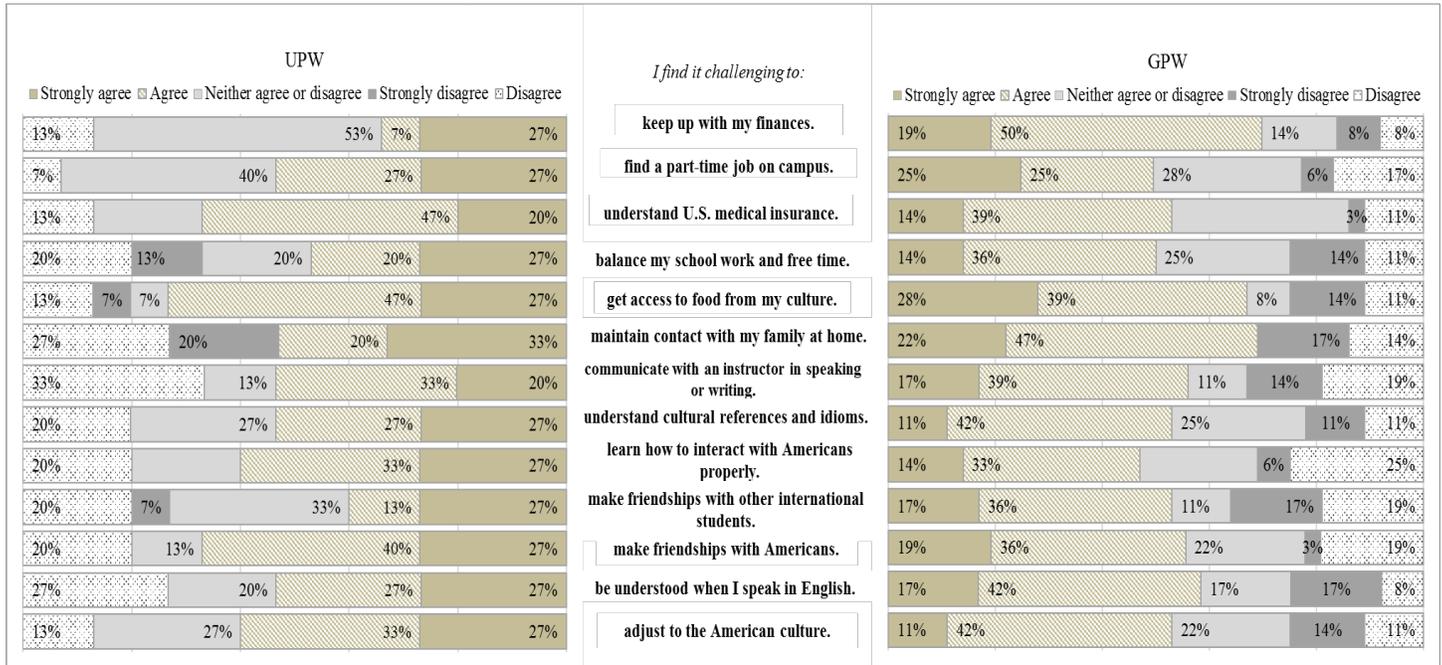
• Common themes from individual student interviews *at the end of the first semester*:

Challenges	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Understanding lectures due to an instructor’s speed or accent, Ss’ limited vocabulary – Unclear assignment requirements – Some classes are beyond academic level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Speaking clearly due to own accents – Writing research papers – Making friends with Americans
Suggestions for support	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Provide clear guidelines for assignments or show sample work – Put pathway Ss in smaller classes – Help with academic writing – Ability to self-select courses or consult with Ss 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Explain U.S. academic expectations clearly – Provide tutoring opportunities – Offer more out-of-class activities to interact with domestic Ss
Student Voices	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>“It is hard to understand what the professor is saying. I have to translate the information or the knowledge of my major into mine... that’s kind of challenging because we are not used to the English lecture.”</i> [GPW, Computer Science] – <i>“That class is hard and I think the teacher maybe when students are confused, she maybe can slow down or explain more slowly to help students to understand because I saw some classmates that are international students, and they also have the same questions.”</i> [UPW, Humanities] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>“First, it’s hard to meet native students. Second, I thought native students are not interested in us. I know that’s a fact. We need to do our best to meet native students. We need some help or communication or ways to make this possible. This is the first time I came to America or pathways, so I don’t have enough facts to compare to.”</i> [GPW, Computer Science]

• UPW and GPW academic challenges in their **second semester**:



• UPW and GPW sociocultural challenges in their **second semester**:



CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

- At entry, both UPW and GPW felt positively about their academic abilities as well as the sociocultural aspects of studying in a foreign country. This can be due to that fact that students were at the very beginning of their academic journey in a new country. They were in the “honeymoon” stage filled with feelings of excitement and euphoria (Hommadova, 2017). UPW students were relatively conservative in their ratings at entry compared to the GPW students. This may be related to age and life experience.
- The individual interviews showed that both UPW and GPW students faced similar academic and sociocultural issues.
 - The most recurrent academic concerns were understanding lectures and assignments due to limited vocabulary, listening comprehension, or instructors’ speed or accent. Writing research papers was a concern for the GPW population.
 - Students seemed to have positive sociocultural experience at WSU and Pullman in general. They feel safe, they can practice their spiritual beliefs, and they find the community to be friendly.
 - The major issue that both UPW and GPW students are facing is making friends with Americans. They find it difficult to interact with locals due to language barriers and cultural differences.
- Results from the follow-up survey demonstrated that more than half of the UPW and GPW (50%-67%) either agreed or strongly agreed with the listed academic challenges. Common sociocultural challenges included making friends with Americans (UGP 67%, GPW 55%), getting access to ethnic food (UGP 74%, GPW 67%), and understanding U.S. medical insurance (UGP 67%, GPW 53%). Keeping up with finances was rated higher by GPW students (69%).
- These results are consistent with the literature (Caplan & Scott, 2017; Perry, Weatherford, & Lausch, 2016). Nonetheless, undergraduate and graduate international students in pathway systems have additional unique challenges. Some of these challenges include balancing discipline-related courses while refining English skills and finding some of the pre-determined courses challenging.
- Ongoing efforts are made to support pathway students in their academic courses. This includes curriculum adaptation, studio hours, Learning Resource Center, advising, and student experience activities.

REFERENCES

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- Kuo, Y. (2011). Language challenges faced by international graduate students in the United States. *Journal of International Students*, 1(2), 38-42.
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