



What International Students Want Faculty and Staff to Know

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Introduction

This project aimed to inform faculty on how to create equitable learning environments where belonging is a key component. These efforts are important as Muhlenberg College carries out a strategic plan to recruit and retain diverse students and faculty, and promote an inclusive climate. Increased awareness of diversity concerns and pedagogical strategies, in addition to the development of intra- and inter-institutional networks and sustainable resources are anticipated outcomes. In this project, Muhlenberg focused on the experience of international students. Nationwide, there has been 0.9% drop in new student enrollment for third year running.

Methods

Summer 2019:

- Review of existing data; literature review; planning sessions
 - Background information in regards to pedagogy for international students

September 2019:

- Open house for self-identifying international students
 - Four discussion tables were established to tackle the topics of student/faculty relationship, language and culture, student success at Muhlenberg college, and social life. Group of students rotated these tables and gave feedbacks based upon pre-established questionnaires
 - 16 attendees: 7 First year, 9 Upperclassmen; China, Vietnam, Rwanda, South Africa, India, Mexico

October/November 2019:

- International Student Survey
 - Refined questions based on Open House responses
- 8 Faculty Interviews
 - Faculty chosen identified as having international background (i.e. American students who studied abroad, international students during undergraduate and/or graduate studies)

Results

Academic - Major themes heard from students

- Cultural spotlighting
 - “[I] felt comfortable sharing culture- helped me participate in class, but other students might not like that”
- Making assumptions about identity and culture
 - One student explained that students and some professors will ask crazy questions that make them seem very culturally unaware, like “Do you have _____ in your country,” as if all people in their country came from a really undeveloped place
 - “If classes are American based on history and culture, have guidelines for what to prepare for”
- Academic Expectations
 - “I don’t want them to treat me differently because I’m an international student. I don’t want special privileges”
- Communication
 - “It’s okay”: Often said by professors when a student expresses that they are having trouble getting their point across → students expressed that this feels like an easy way out and doesn’t help them get their point across
 - “You mean this”: Often said by professors as if they know the point being made better than the student → this makes them feel like sharing their idea was pointless

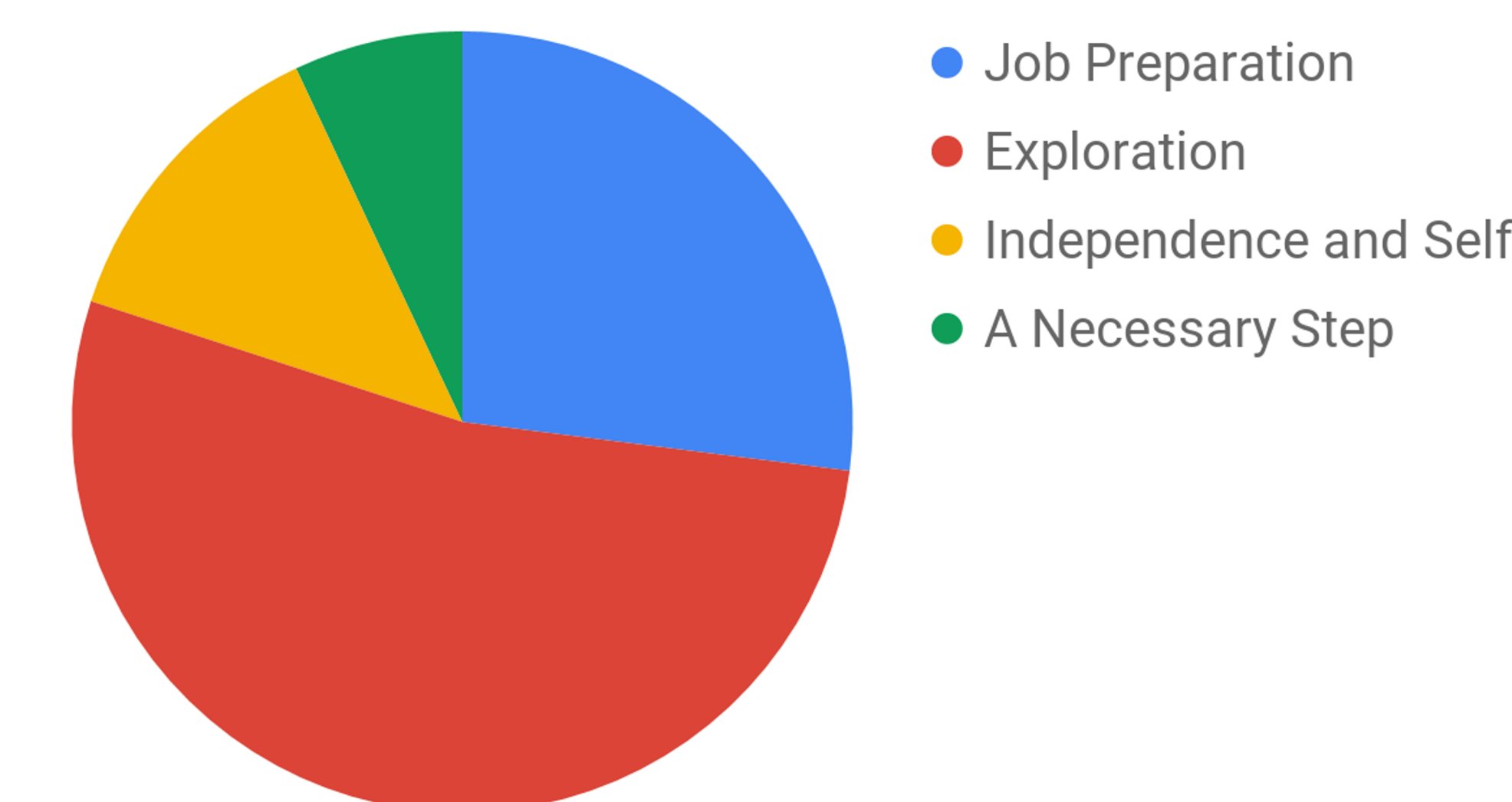
Social - Major themes listed below

- Cultural Shock (definition: “a sense of confusion and uncertainty sometimes with feelings of anxiety that may affect people exposed to an alien culture or environment without adequate preparation” - Webster)
 - Big C and little c (visible vs implied)
 - Living Space: “Sharing the bathroom is hard. [In] boarding school, [the school] owns bathroom inside the room.”
 - Assimilation: “[I] came from a culture that was more communal, and America is more individualistic”
- Belonging
 - Community: “Rwanda community helps me feel welcome and home”
 - Roommate: Food, conversation with parents, lack of socialization, may affect interaction with students
 - “[I] FaceTime and video call [my] family; [I] talk to [my] parents often.”
- Social Expectations
 - “Students at Muhlenberg are surprised that there are international students”

Success at Muhlenberg

- GAR courses: split reaction
- Job & Internship: confusing tax system, prefer more hands-on experience
- Academics: need for a smoother transition between academic systems

According to International Students, undergraduate program means...



Conclusions

The findings were presented at the Muhlenberg Center for Teaching and Learning Session on International Students on December 2019.

Few takeaways:

- 1) Must be explicit about cultural norms and expectations about college (i.e. language usage, available resources, rules of engagement)
- 2) International students bring a wide range of experiences, background knowledge, expectations, and preferences. No assumptions should be made. Therefore when we need to find out student’s need, we need to ask directly.

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