



## Cornell University Graduate and Professional Student Assembly

### **Draft GPCI-Graduate and Professional Community Initiative:**

# International Students

## Introduction

In Fall 2018, 48.5% of all graduate students and 32% of all professional students were international. That's over 3600 graduate and professional students from 116 different countries represented in the Cornell student body. Despite their strong presence there are few support services geared specifically towards international students. There is also a lack of understanding of the international student experience at Cornell. This leads to a monolithic view of international students when in reality there is a spectrum of experiences amongst the international student body. This lack of knowledge also makes it more difficult to establish programming or support structures for the community. It should also be cautioned against using the American model of diversity to describe the international student experience.

The 2013 GPCI document accounted for international students, domestic students of color and LGBT students within the same section. The first objective of the document called for the creation of the Diversity and International Student Committee (DISC). The document called for increased support structures for international students with four specific action items related to career resources, mental health, challenges with English as a second language and programming related to cultural differences. While Cornell and The Graduate School has implemented a number of action items since 2013, a majority of these have been focused on domestic students. In regard to international students, an important development since the 2013 GPCI is the creation of the English Language Support Office (ELSO). ELSO has been extremely successful with participation in their programs, rising from 465 students per year in 2016 to 2001 students in 2017. The office runs twelve credit-bearing half-semester courses; a robust peer tutoring program that provides individual consultations on writing, presentations, and pronunciation; a bi-weekly series of 90-minute workshops; and an innovative conversation program that brings together community volunteers with international graduate and professional students for weekly "speaking group" meetings (Michelle Cox).

## Objectives

### **Objective 1: Improve resources available to international students during their orientation period.**

*Rationale:* For many international students, the beginning of their graduate career at Cornell is also their first introduction to the US. Even for those students who have prior experience with American culture, starting a graduate degree in a new country is a difficult and confusing process. Currently, all

international graduate and professional students are required to attend the International Student Orientation. However, the three-hour orientation cannot rectify all possible issues faced by incoming international students. It should also not be assumed that all incoming international students have the same experiences. For some, the cultural differences might be insignificant, while for others this might be an enormous cultural shift. Cornell needs to have flexible orientation programs that address student concerns across the spectrum of diversity and experience. Some incoming international students, for whom studying in the US might be an extremely large cultural shift, might be interested in a more formal, long-term mentorship program while others might require minimal assistance.

*Actions:*

- a. Have the Office of Global Learning (OGL) coordinate an informal, voluntary transition program for all incoming international students.
  - I. Have the OGL create and coordinate a platform for incoming international students that allows them to connect with current international students and resolve any queries related to living and studying in Ithaca.
  - II. Following the examples of student organizations like Cornell India Association and the Argentine and Uruguayan Friends at Cornell, connect incoming international students with volunteers who can, for example, coordinate rides from the airport or inspect housing options when required.
- b. Create a formal, application-based mentorship program for interested first-year international students.
  - I. Fund a formal mentorship program for incoming international students that apply for the same. Some degree of pre-selection might be required depending on the funding and the number of students applying to be mentors.
  - II. The program should include Academic 101 workshops that cover the intricacies of the US academic system, Cornell definitions of academic integrity and plagiarism, etc. These workshops should be open to the general international student body.
  - III. The program should also include dinners or other suitable bonding retreats for mentors and mentees, allowing incoming students to connect with current students and the greater Cornell community.
  - IV. Ensure that mentors in the program are suitably compensated, either monetarily or through professional recognition/certificates.
- c. Work with the International Student Union (ISU) to create and regularly update an International Graduate Student Survival Guide.
- d. Besides greater involvement of international student organizations, the International Student Orientation should ensure involvement from resource centers and other support offices.
  - I. This specifically includes the LGBTRC as differences in attitudes and acceptance levels in different countries might prevent international students from reaching out themselves.
  - II. This also includes Student Disability Service and Cornell Health as international students might not be aware of the range of accommodations available to students with disabilities. Cornell Health's presence is also extremely important because cultural stigmas might prevent students from reaching out in regard to mental health issues.

**Objective 2: Improve support services for international students at Cornell**

*Rationale:* While Cornell does offer various support services for all graduate students, there isn't enough awareness of the fact that international students often have a different set of needs and experiences that affects all aspects of their lives. This is not limited to support only on campus but also outside of Cornell. As the current political climate in the United States becomes harsher to immigrants, the international student community at Cornell may be faced with difficulties off-campus - at airports, while travelling or while simply living in the Ithaca community. Currently, there is little to no support offered to international students in these circumstances. On-campus support services that are specifically aimed at international students need to gather feedback from international students on their efficacy and reorient if necessary. On-campus general support services need to make sure that they are addressing the needs of the international student population.

*Actions:*

- a. Restructure the mandatory training program, International Teaching Assistant Program (ITAP), to be more sensitive to the needs of international students.
  - I. International students should have the ability to waive this requirement if they're from an institution where English was the primary language of instruction. There should also be opportunities to appeal this requirement on a case by case basis.
  - II. While the focus on TA training is appreciated, the fact that this is only required for international students and not domestic students (irrespective of prior teaching experience) is biased and appears condescending.
  - III. Since the programming is aimed at a wide audience, it is actually less practical since teaching styles and class structures vary across disciplines. A focus on more practical aspects of teaching at Cornell, such as a focus on the differences in academic systems or a discussion on academic integrity or plagiarism would be more useful.
  - IV. The four-day program, held before the term starts, is also very intense for incoming international students and students might be better served if the program was shortened or spread across the first few weeks of the semester.
- b. Continue to support and fund the English Language Support Office (ELSO).
  - I. ELSO's successful programming is an excellent example of supporting both English as a second language (ESL) students as well as international students unfamiliar with the American style of writing and speaking. Their programs focus on feedback to the students as opposed to assessments.
  - II. Increase funding to ELSO, enabling the office to hire more tutors. ELSO tutors offer feedback to students on writing, presentations and pronunciations. These services are well used and their popularity has led to an increase in the number of waitlisted appointments.
  - III. Increased funding could also enable increased programming, especially in the form of their workshops which are well attended and appreciated.
- c. Make emergency funds available for international students who are in need of financial assistance.
  - I. The Graduate School grants emergency funding up to \$1000 for all domestic students but specifically excludes international students (<https://personalfinance.cornell.edu/2016/01/15/emergency-funds/>).
  - II. The OGL only offers short term loans for international students in financial distress. These loans have to be repaid within a month to avoid paying interest (<https://isso.cornell.edu/financial/financial-aid/>).

- III. This discrepancy needs to be addressed by either making Graduate School Emergency Funds available to all graduate students or ensuring that the OGL will offer emergency funding comparable to the Graduate School.
- d. Offer legal assistance for international students in need by hiring staff with legal training or working in conjunction with the Cornell Law School.
  - I. Dealing with legal issues is always difficult, but legal scenarios become even more complicated when considering international students. International students often face greater challenges than their domestic counterparts since their legal troubles are further muddled due to immigration status. Given the current political climate, it becomes even more necessary that Cornell takes steps toward protecting their international student community physically and legally.
  - II. Hire at least one lawyer on staff for the OGL who is capable of offering legal assistance to international students when necessary.
  - III. Currently some clinics at the Cornell Law School offer free legal advice for members of the larger Tompkins County community (<https://www.lawschool.cornell.edu/Clinical-Programs/lgbtclinic/for-potential-clients.cfm>; <https://www.lawschool.cornell.edu/Clinical-Programs/entrepreneurship-clinic/Home.cfm>). Depending on the expertise of staff and students at the Cornell Law School, as well as program requirements for the students, a similar clinic offering legal advice for the international community could be established.

### Objective 3: Improve campus climate for international students.

*Rationale:* One of the primary themes of conversation with international students was a crippling sense of isolation. Many students discussed feeling depressed and alone, preventing them from achieving professional and academic goals. Cultural stigmas associated with mental health in many international communities prevented many of them from reaching out to Cornell Health for counselling. Mental Health has been an important topic of discussion at Cornell and is a vital section of the GPCI as well. However, conversations on mental health need to acknowledge that international students often approach mental health differently from American students and their experience and feedback needs to be taken into account when discussing the impact of proposed changes to mental health services provided by Cornell.

While the conversation on mental health is crucial, we need to plan to intervene before the need for counselling is reached. Work needs to be done on creating social support structures for international students and for encouraging a close-knit international community at Cornell. While the Office of Global Learning does attempt to organize some programs for international students to gather and meet (such as the International Coffee Hour), their programming is fairly limited and not widely advertised. Another important approach to combating the social isolation faced by international students is to break down barriers between domestic and international students. A lot of domestic students are often ignorant of many nationalities, cultures and religions beyond their own. This can lead to 'othering' of international students.

#### *Actions:*

- a. Collect data on the international student experience with regard to mental health and well-being in the Cornell community to understand the unique challenges of the community.
- b. Hire mental health professionals with diverse, international backgrounds for CAPS.

- I. It is impossible to cover the breadth of all international students' experience at Cornell. However, more staff needs to be hired that is equipped to deal with the international student experience.
- II. The intersectionality of nationality, race, gender and sexuality is extremely complicated. Mental health specialists with an LGBT focus, for example, do not necessarily have the right training to deal with LGBT international students.
- c. Organize programs that allow international students the opportunity to meet and connect with others in the community.
  - I. This can be in the form of International Student Socials, held once a month, that gives international students the opportunity to gather and celebrate with other international students.
  - II. A yearly event, similar to the International Gala organized by ISU, should be organized for the international graduate student community.
  - III. This programming can also be a channel for the international community to support one and another after tragedies.
  - IV. This programming can be especially important during the holidays when international students are still on campus.
  - V. Focus on programming that celebrates the diversity of international student experiences.
- d. Connect new international students to the various international student organizations on campus in an attempt to foster community.
  - I. While some international student organizations are present at the international student orientation, they are not a comprehensive list of all international student organizations at Cornell. A collated list of international student organizations should be created so new and continuing students can connect with the organizations they are interested in.
  - II. This is especially important for students from countries with not much representation amongst the international student organizations. It can be important for these students to find community in international student organizations that are similar in culture.
- e. Connect international organizations to each other, as well as to existing resource centers, like the Asian and Asian-American Center.
- f. Organize events that are focused on bringing awareness of different nationalities and cultures to the broader Cornell community.
  - I. This can be in the form of larger, campus-wide events, such as cultural fairs. This could allow multiple departments, international organizations and students to showcase the food and culture of their countries.
  - II. This can also be in smaller events that encourages the normalization of other countries and their cultures.
- g. Commit to hiring resident advisors at all on-campus housing at an equal proportion to the number of international students that are residents at the same.
  - I. Many international students choose international student housing, especially in their first year, since it is logistically easier. For their needs, international students should be hired as resident advisors.
  - II. While acknowledging the Maplewood is not on-campus housing, and international students can thus not be hired as resident advisors, a large number of international students are choosing Maplewood as their housing option. Cornell must negotiate a deal with EdR to ensure international students get a chance to be resident advisors at Maplewood Apartments.

#### Objective 4: Recruitment and retention of international graduate and professional students and faculty.

*Rationale:* Currently not a lot of recruitment efforts, both at the University and individual college level, appear to be aimed at international students. International students can't afford to visit Cornell and are rarely flown out by departments for such visits. They thus miss out on opportunities to interact with faculty and other students before starting their degree program.

Following the Campus Climate Survey, Cornell committed to hiring and retaining diverse faculty.

Nationality should be considered an important axis of diversity. Currently, only 4.5% of all faculty and only 1% of all full professors at Cornell identified as international in Fall

2017(<http://irp.dpb.cornell.edu/university-factbook/diversity>). This is an alarmingly low number, especially since Cornell prides itself on its international research efforts. This focus on international research needs to be met with an equal level of investment into hiring international faculty.

Recruiting international students and faculty are only part of the challenge. Greater efforts need to be expended on retaining hired faculty and students. Beyond the physical and social support required to retain students (this is covered in other objectives in this section), an important issue that might affect retention is the lack of access to funding opportunities for international students. Most federal research grants are not available to international students. International students are also less likely to have summer funding and unlike their domestic counterparts are not legally allowed to work off-campus easily. A significant and growing percentage of international students (~46% in 2018, up from 19% in 2002) are Professional Master's students and there is extremely limited funding available for these programs (<http://irp.dpb.cornell.edu/university-factbook/student-enrollment>).

#### *Actions:*

- a. Design virtual resources/ fairs so as to improve resource access for international students who cannot physically travel to campus for recruitment events.
- b. Work with individual departments to better involve international students in their recruitment weekends.
  - I. Reach out to Graduate Field Assistants (GFA) and Department Heads to offer assistance with their individual recruiting weekends. This service could include a virtual tour for potential international students, recording and communicating important information or lectures or connecting them with alternate funding opportunities.
- c. Increase funding for international students, especially for professional degree students.
  - I. This includes funding for research and travel, especially for students conducting research outside the US.
  - II. This includes summer funding for research and travel.
- d. Increase the number of Cornell fellowships available to continuing international graduate and professional students.
  - I. While Cornell offers a few fellowships for recruitment of new international students, there are no Cornell fellowships available to continuing international graduate students.
- e. Increase the number of international faculty that are hired across colleges.
  - I. Ensure that faculty positions are being advertised across multiple platforms both within and outside the US.
  - II. Prioritize the hiring of international faculty, especially for those positions where international research is the focus of the lab.