



**WHAT DO FIRST YEAR INTERNATIONAL AND DOMESTIC STUDENTS  
HAVE TO SAY ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCES AT UBC?**

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May, 2005

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## INTRODUCTION

It can be argued that the presence of international students in Canadian universities is beneficial for international and Canadian students, the host institutions, and the economies and cultures of Canada and the students' countries of origin. Through their presence on university campuses, international students bring with them international perspectives which have an impact on the classroom and larger institutional environment. In doing so, university life for students, faculty and staff is enriched by a cultural diversity which would not otherwise be present (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 1987). The economic benefits to universities and local communities are derived through high tuition fees, related fees and through living costs. According to the Department of Foreign Trade international students contributed approximately \$2.7 billion to the economy (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 2001). The AUCC (2001) estimates the economic contributions from international students to the British Columbia at approximately \$443 million.

Developing networks with international students in "target countries" (Knight, 2000a, p. 53) enhances the profiles of host institutions and communities and strengthens economic and trade links between Canada and international students' countries of origin (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 2001). In addition, international students acquire knowledge and skills at prestigious Canadian universities which will eventually be converted into economic, social and cultural development in their home countries. Today's international students will become tomorrow's "influential spokespersons" (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2001, p.6) in the global community.

However, despite these advantages, the presence on international students can be problematic for both students and the host institutions. Lyakhovetska (2003) points out that "despite the promotion of the academic value of internationalization for the teaching, learning, research, and service aspects of higher educational institutions (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 1995; OECD Secretariat, 1989), it is the economic dimension, with emphasis on marketing Canadian education abroad and on the short-term benefits of income generation, that raises significant pedagogical concerns, ethical issues, and policy implications" (p.190). Although it has been reported that international students are highly satisfied with their post-secondary experiences in Canada (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2004; Lyakhovetska, 2003; Song, 1995; Walker, 1999b), many problems and difficulties are reported also. In addition to problems related to the transition to university, international students encounter additional academic, personal, social and economic challenges. Making friends, dealing with loneliness, struggling to master English, learning new customs, diets and lifestyles are a but a few of the challenges.

In turn, host universities are faced with rising to the challenge of offering services and programs to assist and enhance academic and social integration of their international (and domestic students). Today's universities are confronted with limited institutional resources, less than optimal levels of staffing, and varying degrees of understanding and consensus by staff, faculty and students about what "internationalization" of the university and its related program and curriculum actually means. As Lyakhovetska (2003) asserts, "although several studies highlight the benefits that international students bring to host campuses, striking evidence in many studies demonstrates a lack of effort by institutions to meet the needs of international students" (p.192). This sentiment is echoed by the 2004 survey of international students by the CBIE (2004).

## PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

In this document, we report the findings of one part of a larger cross-national SSHRC funded research project examining the experiences and outcomes of international and domestic students attending the University of British Columbia. Through focus groups with first year domestic and international undergraduate students conducted at two points in time (in October 2003 and February 2004), we highlight students' goals and experiences over their first year of study at UBC. Through a comparative analysis, we examine goals and experiences that are common and unique to international and domestic students attending the same university.

The research is a part of cross-national SSHRC funded research study entitled *University Outcomes and Experiences of First Year Undergraduate International and Domestic Students*. The purpose of this study is to follow international and domestic undergraduate students over their first three years of university attendance at four institutions – The University of British Columbia, York University, McGill University and Dalhousie University. Beginning in the 2003-04 year, mail questionnaires were sent to the entire population of first year international and a matching sample of domestic students. The purpose of the survey was to determine their educational experiences and perspectives during their first year of study. The survey will be repeated in 2004-05 and 2005-06. Because data are being collected over the course of three years, we will be able to track experiences and outcomes over time. In addition, focus groups will be held with small groups of domestic and international students in each of the three years of this project.

In this document, we report the findings generated from four focus groups. In October 2003, we held two focus groups (one each with international students and domestic students). In February 2004, we held another set of focus groups with international and domestic students. The intent of the focus groups was to examine the goals and in- and out-of-class experiences, their experiences in a broader environment, and assess the extent to which the quality of these experiences led to certain educational outcomes. Each focus group was approximately two hours long.

In this report, we begin by providing a brief review of the research literature on attrition, retention and student success and its relation to the findings of research on international students. This review is followed by a demographic overview of the UBC first year student population in the 2003-04 academic year. Findings of the October 2003 and February 2004 focus groups are then described. The report concludes with a summary of the findings, followed by recommendations to improve the experiences of first year international and domestic students attending UBC.

## OVERVIEW OF THE CURRENT RESEARCH LITERATURE ON ATTRITION, RETENTION, AND STUDENT SUCCESS

There is a large and well known body of research on university attrition, retention and student success. Most of the research has been grounded on a theoretical model of persistence/dropout developed by Tinto (1975, 1987 #269; Tinto, 1993). Based on this model, persistence and withdrawal behaviour by students has been described as the degree of “fit” between students and their institutional environments.

According to this model, students arrive at a given institution with a range of personal characteristics (*e.g.*, sex, ethnicity), family and community of origin characteristics (*e.g.*, family socioeconomic status, size of community), skills (*e.g.*, intellectual and social), value orientations, achievements, and experiences from prior schooling (*e.g.*, academic ability, secondary school achievement). Each of these characteristics affects the individual’s initial formulation of intentions and commitments about future educational activities. Individual characteristics, initial intentions, and commitments influence subsequent experiences within the institution. In turn, these determine the individual’s integration into the institution.

It is argued that the extent to which academic integration occurs is determined by academic performance and level of intellectual development. Social integration is a result of the quality of peer group interactions and the quality of student interactions with faculty. Levels of social and academic integration lead to second order commitments toward the institution and graduation. The higher one’s level of institutional and goal commitment, the more likely the individual is to persist at the institution. Tinto (1993) concludes, “the greater students’ involvement in the life of the [university], especially academic life, the greater their acquisition of knowledge and development of skills” (p.130-131).

Tinto's model and its modifications have served as a basis for numerous empirical studies. These studies have focussed on factors affecting persistence at university (Gilbert, Chapman, Dietsche, Grayson, & Gardner, 1997; Gilbert, Evers, & Auger, 1989; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Wong, 1994) the relationship between successful adjustment to and experiences in the first year of university and subsequent academic achievement and skill acquisition (Fidler & Moore, 1996; Huff, Cook, & Price, 1996; Hyers & Joslin, 1998; Levitz & Noel, 1989; Terenzini, Springer, Yeager, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996), and retention of ethnic groups (Nora, 1987). Other studies have focussed on specific constructs of the model such as faculty-student contacts (Endo & Harpel, 1982; Pascarella, 1980) and predictors of social and academic integration (Chapman & Pascarella, 1983). In general, these studies confirm Tinto's thesis that the fit between the individual and the institution is a good predictor of dropout or persistence, positive educational experiences and eventual academic success.

Other models (*e.g.*, Benjamin, 1994; Benjamin & Hollings, 1995) address the complexity of students’ lives and incorporate other factors – both within and outside post-secondary institutions – which have consequences for students’ lives. For example, Johnson (1991) has extended those factors categorized as exogenous to include disadvantage and outside community support.

To a much lesser degree, variations of work by Tinto and others have been used to devise and assess the experiences and outcomes of certain types of non-traditional students. Such research also focuses on student-institutional “fit;” that is, students’ social and academic integration into the institution (Bean, 1985; Fox, 1986; Johnson, 1991; Stahl & Pavel, 1992). The findings of numerous studies reveal that although social and academic integration are important factors in predicting persistence, their differential importance varies depending on the particular characteristics of the students. For example, whereas older students and those who commute to campus appear to place less value on social integration, academic integration as measured by grades, intellectual

development and faculty interaction are still crucial in ensuring success (Andres, Hawkey, & Andruske, 1996b; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Benjamin & Hollings, 1995; Ethington, 1990; Johnson, 1991; Stahl & Pavel, 1992; Voorhees, 1987). For specific groups of students such as the hard of hearing (Warick, 2004) academic and social integration has both traditional and non-traditional meanings.

However, although some research on “non-traditional” students exists, most of the studies conducted to date focus on domestic university students. Moreover, almost no research simultaneously compares the experiences of domestic and international students attending Canadian universities<sup>1</sup>. As a result, little systematic information on the experiences of international and Canadian students while attending universities exists.

A modest body of research documents the experiences of international post-secondary students. Findings of these studies can be summarized under the following themes: adjustment issues such as loneliness and homesickness (Church, 1982) well-being issues (Church, 1982) financial concerns (Uehara & Hicks, 1989), friendship and local community membership issues (Antonio, 1989; Berry & Kostovcik, 1983; Chataway & Berry, 1989; Finsterbusch, 1992; Klineberg & Hull, 1979; Mickle, 1985; Rohrllich, 1991) difficulties with language acquisition (Fradd & Weismantel, 1989; Lyakhovetska, 2003; Perrucci & Hu, 1995), academic performance (Walker, 1999b), and experiences with discrimination (Sodowsky & Plake, 1992).

For the most part, existing models have not been modified to adequately incorporate the demographic heterogeneity of today’s student population (Andres, 2004). Recent demographic profiles of post-secondary students such as those attending UBC reveal that “non-traditional” students of the past – including international students – are now an integral part of the mainstream student population (Gilley & Hawkes, 1989; Hybertson, Hulme, Smith, & Holton, 1992; Raven & Jimmerson, 1992). Nor have existing theoretical models and related empirical analyses addressed the “dynamic relationship between students as agents within societal institutions and institutions as living structures which impact on the lives of students” (Andres, 2004, p.3). This agency-structure nexus is critical to our understanding of how students negotiate the university and how institutions, in turn, respond to students. Although the factors included in earlier models may provide a starting point, they may not be sufficient in explaining the educational outcomes of international students in relation to domestic students. By critically examining international and domestic students’ experiences, this study will broaden our theoretical understandings and lead to recommendation to enhance the experiences of all UBC students.

## **WHO ARE THE FIRST YEAR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT UBC?**

### ***THE UBC STUDENT POPULATION***

For the academic year, 2003-2004 UBC was home to 40,945 students. The undergraduate student population was 33,566. The total International student population (including graduate and undergraduate) was 4,054, of which 720 were in their first year of studies.

The first year international student population was comprised of 403 females and 317 males. These students originated from fifty-eight different countries. The countries with the highest number of International students attending UBC were as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> Exceptions include Grayson (Grayson, 1998) and Dietsche (1990).

- Taiwan 185
- Korea 98
- China 84
- Hong Kong 66
- Iran 65
- United Kingdom 30
- India 27
- United States 26

The remaining countries had 10 or less citizens attending UBC as International students. First year international student participation by country of citizenship is summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1. First Year International Student Participation at UBC by Country of Citizenship, 2003-04**

Country of Citizenship	Total	Country of Citizenship	Total
Algeria	1	Korea	98
Argentina	1	Malaysia	9
Australia	1	Mexico	4
Azerbaijan	1	Nepal	1
Bangladesh	2	Netherlands	2
Bosnia	3	Pakistan	7
British Solomon Islands	1	Peru	2
Brunei	1	Philippines	10
China	84	Portugal	2
Columbia	3	Romania	7
Denmark	1	Russia	4
Egypt	2	Rwanda	1
El Salvador	1	Singapore	2
Ethiopia	1	Slovakia	3
Finland	2	Somalia	1
France	1	South Africa	6
Germany, Democratic Republic	1	Sudan	3
Germany, Federal Republic	3	Switzerland	1
Germany	3	Taiwan	185
Hong Kong	66	Thailand	2
Hungary	1	Uganda	1
India	27	Ukraine	5
Indonesia	7	United Kingdom	30
Iran	65	United States of America	26
Iraq	1	Uzbekistan	1
Ireland	1	Venezuela	1
Israel	5	Vietnam	1
Italy	1	Yugoslavia	1
Japan	8	Zambia	1
Korea, North	8		



## ***DEGREE PROGRAM OF FIRST-YEAR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS***

In general, first year international students were enrolled in the following degree programs: BA (N=273), BSc (N=191), BASC (N=106), BSFN (N=34), BCOM (N=33) (Table 2). More females than males tended to be enrolled in each of these programs; however, more males than females were enrolled in the Bachelor of Science program.

**Table 2. First Year International Student Enrolment by Program, 2003-04**

<b>Degree Program</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>Grand Total</b>
Bachelor of Arts	163	110	273
Bachelor of Applied Science	23	83	106
Bachelor of Commerce	26	7	33
B.D.Sc.(Dental Hygiene)	1		1
Bachelor of Education (Elementary)	6		6
Bachelor of Education (Sec)	7	2	9
Bachelor of Human Kinetics	2		2
Bachelor of Music	5		5
Bachelor of Science (Agroecology)	5	3	8
Bachelor of Science	110	81	191
Bachelor of Science (Forestry)	4	2	6
Bachelor of Science (Natural Resource Cons)	1	2	3
Bachelor of Science (Pharmacy)	9	3	12
Bachelor of Science (Wood Prods Proc)		5	5
Bachelor of Science Forestry	2	2	4
Bachelor of Science (FNH)	24	10	34
Bachelor of Science in Nursing	2		2
Bachelor of Social Work	2		2
Doctor of Dental Medicine	3	3	6
Bachelor of Laws	6	2	8
Doctor of Medicine	1	1	2
No Response	1	1	2
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>403</b>	<b>317</b>	<b>720</b>

## ***UNDERGRADUATE INTERNATIONAL TUITION FEES***

Undergraduate international fees in 2003-04 were as follows: 15unit/30 credit program= \$15,870 and for 18unit/36 credit program =\$19,044. Comparable undergraduate domestic fees were \$3,459 (*UBC Calendar, 2003-2004*).

## ***SERVICES AVAILABLE TO INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT UBC***

According to the UBC Fact Book (2003-2004) international students have access to all available student supports and services provided by UBC. However, UBC recognizes that International students also deserve services that specifically address their unique needs. Through International House, International students are provided services and programs such as one-to-one

advising, educational and social programs, ESL classes, and the Peer Program. The Peer program provides opportunities for senior UBC students and new international students to meet, plan social events and develop a support network. International student services also coordinate the UBC student exchange programs and provide social and cultural space to the international community at International House. International student advisors (ISAs) also provide information and guidance about immigration and employment, medical insurance and adjustment to their new lives as UBC students in Canada. Another important service provided by International student services is the *International Student Handbook*. This handbook provides information on many topics including health insurance, meeting people and academic support.

Along with the services provided by the International Student Services housed in International House, many other organizations on campus provide support and social activities for international and other UBC students. One such group is the Alma Mater Society (AMS). The AMS provides health plan coverage, variety of clubs and student societies. The AMS International Student Issues Commissioner liaises with the AMS and International House with the goal of identifying and addressing issues facing International students.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

### ***SAMPLING PROCEDURE***

For the purpose of this study, a non-probabilistic procedure of purposive sampling was used (Palys, 1997). The target population was first year undergraduate students at UBC. Recruitment procedures included the following. First, posters inviting international and domestic students were distributed to all faculties with first year undergraduate students. In addition, posters were displayed on bulletin boards at public places across the UBC campus, in most student residences, and in International House. The coordinator of first year undergraduate student services at UBC sent invitations to participate in this study in weekly email news and through the International House internal email list server. In exchange for their involvement, all participants were offered \$15.00, food, refreshments, and useful resources. Interested participants contacted the project research assistant via telephone and email who answered their questions regarding the study and arranged the focus group sessions.

### ***FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH***

A focus group design is useful when the intent of the research is to promote self-disclosure among participants. Krueger (1994) indicates that through the use of open-ended questions and discussions, qualitative data generated from focus groups provide insights into the attitudes, perceptions, and opinions of participants. When compared with individual interviews, a focus group setting creates a more dynamic environment because participants influence and are influenced by others in ways similar to real life encounters (Krueger, 1994; Litoselliti, 2003; Morgan, 1997). According to Finch and Lewis (2003), because interactions in focus groups are spontaneous, participants are more willing to share deeper personal views on particular topics. Morgan (1988) defines focus groups as group interviews consisting of both interviews and participant observation. Moreover, focus groups provide access to forms of data that are not

obtained easily with either of the other of the two methods. Results from discussions are less influenced by interaction with the researcher. Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) claim that “the focus group research situation is itself a complex interaction of the purpose of the research, the composition of the group, and the physical setting in which the group takes place” (p.87).

The benefits a focus group approach to research include the following: revealing new information and consolidating existing knowledge; obtaining different perspectives; gaining on participants’ views, attitudes, beliefs, responses, motivations and perceptions on a topic; examining participants’ shared understandings of every day life and the everyday use of language and culture of particular groups; brainstorming and generating ideas; gaining insights; and, exploring controversial issues and complex or sensitive topics. Potential limitations include bias and manipulation, false consensus, difficulty in distinguishing between an individual view and a group view, difficulty in making generalizations, and difficulty of analysis and interpretation of results (Litoselliti, 2003).

In this part of the study, the focus group method was used as a self-contained method. No other methods were used, except for the administration of a short questionnaire to collect demographic characteristics of the participants. Open ended questions prepared for this multi-site project were then customized for UBC students. The questions were piloted with international students who were not involved in the project. Based on the pilot, questions were modified accordingly.

### ***PARTICIPANTS IN THE FIRST FOCUS GROUPS***

International student participants came from a wide variety of countries. In total, eight females (three from China, one from Hong Kong, one from Thailand, one from Korea, one from Indonesia, and one from Mexico) and five males (two from Hong Kong, two from China, and one from Mexico) participated in the international student focus group. Overall, the focus group participants reflect the composition of the first year international community. In the domestic focus group, eight females and one male participated. Four students were from the Lower Mainland, three came from Ontario and one was from Saskatchewan. Students in both groups were studying in various faculties at UBC. The international focus group was held on October 31, 2003 and the domestic focus group was on November 7, 2003.

Students are identified only by sex and country of origin. Domestic female and male students are identified as F-D and M-D, respectively. Their international counterparts are identified as F-I and M-I.

In the next section, the findings of the first focus group sessions are reported. Following this discussion, the sampling procedures and the demographics of the participants of the second focus group sessions are described. Next, the findings from this second phase are presented.

### **FINDINGS OF THE FIRST FOCUS GROUP SESSIONS**

A broad range of topics were covered in the initial focus groups. For the most part, the same or similar questions were asked of both groups. This analysis is organized under the following main headings: choosing UBC, educational objectives, adapting to UBC, social integration, health issues,

the cost of university, the culture of the university, academic work, positive experiences at UBC, academic problems, and best academic experiences.

### *CHOOSING UBC*

Focus group participants were asked to describe why they chose to attend UBC. Three students from Ontario in the domestic focus group were taken by the beauty of Vancouver and the opportunity to “*start fresh.*”

I heard it was really beautiful, and a big campus which I liked, it was closer to the city yet still its own campus entirely. I came from Ontario I thought it was really cool to come here and experience difference. (FD)

I just wanted to get away from everybody else and I wanted to start off new. (FD)

Those from other parts of British Columbia also welcomed a larger, more cosmopolitan environment.

I’m from a very small town in northern B.C. . . . I’ve lived in a small town my whole life, so I was very excited to come to the city, and UBC just seemed to have a lot to offer, and I was really interested in it. (FD)

For those from the Lower Mainland, the ability to remain with parents was key in their decision to attend UBC.

I’m from Richmond, and it’s a 30-minute bus ride here, so it’s close, which is a good thing. I didn’t really want to live . . . away from my parents, because that means I can’t leech off of them! (FD)

Regardless of geographic region of origin, the university and its programs were central in students’ decision making processes.

It was really good in Sciences, very good programs, so that’s why I came here. And I’m from Kelowna . . . . I didn’t have to come. (FD)

I wanted to do a commerce degree, and I just thought UBC would be great. (FD)

The Psychology Department here is also well-known domestically and internationally, and being a major in psychology I thought would be a good place to start with my foundations. (MD)

Two domestic students indicated that their parents were UBC alumni.

I grew up on campus, really. My dad was studying here. (MD)

My father also graduated here, so it was one reason why I chose UBC, and also I live about an hour and a half away, which is just far enough away so they could be in contact and I can still have an experience here, so that was a big factor in making decision. UBC is very distinctive school. (FD)

Two international students' parents or siblings were also alumni of UBC. One international student described his connection with Canada and UBC and the myriad of factors influencing his choice of institution.

I came to Vancouver when I was six, and I got the Canadian citizenship, but then when I was twelve I returned to Hong Kong for my secondary education, and so I studied in Hong Kong for seven years, and then I returned back here for my university studies. Personally, I have a few reasons that I choose here, because of course I lived here before and I'm kind of used to ways of living. I know it's a nice city. . . . And also my brother is a graduate student of UBC, and he told me that the applied science, which is engineering program here, is almost the best in Canada, so I chose here, and I'm studying in applied science now. And also another reason is that the tuition fee here, compared to the Hong Kong university, is at least 20% lower than Hong Kong, so it would just ease my family financial burden, I can say. And so that's it. (M-I)

One domestic student indicated that she had close ties with her parents which limited her ability to attend other institutions.

I live in Vancouver. I kind of wanted to move to Ontario or somewhere. Because I live in a traditional family, my parents pay the tuition; they don't want me to move far away from them. . . . They think that UBC is very good school. Like, they're very traditional. And my sister went to UBC. She's two years older than I am, so they just want me to precede her. (F-D)

According to Huxur, Mansfield, Nazor, Schuetze and Segawa (1996), reasons for choosing to become an international student include expectations and motivations to study abroad, cross-cultural adaptation, and socio-cultural, socio-linguistic and academic needs. The international students in this study expanded on such reasons; their answers were somewhat more strategic. However, as some of the quotes below indicate, location and climate were considered to be an added bonus but not the key reason for choosing UBC.

For one student from Mexico, the choice of UBC was driven by perceptions of nursing in her home country.

Mainly because I wanted to study nursing, and in Mexico nursing . . . it's like a technical career. . . and not very respected by people. . . Nurses are treated very badly . . . not badly, but poorly, and they are not valued for the work they do . . . so the first university I heard about really having a nursing career I liked, it was here. (F-I)

For another international student, the speed of acceptance to UBC impressed her.

I was accepted to UBC very, very fast. I just sent my records and everything, and it was like the only university I applied to. It was the only one I liked, so I applied to it very early, and I was accepted before the actual exams - national exams - that we have . . . was even started. (F-I)

Another international student stated that *"university education in North America is higher quality, a higher quality education than any part of the world, because here they teach you how to think, how to solve the problems, rather than writing exams."*

Several international students indicated that it was very difficult to get visas and study permits to the U.S.A.

Because before I would apply [to] UBC I was admitted by University of California in Los Angeles, but it seems impossible to get my visa approved. . . . especially from China it's hard to get visa from U.S. visa offices. (M-I)

Since it's hard to get my study permit approved by an American Embassy so I chose Canada, because I heard that's similar. Yeah, that's why, because I have heard UBC Commerce is one of the best in Canada, plus I love the weather in Vancouver. It's very cool. (M-I)

These comments concur with remarks by Richard Florida in an interview about his forthcoming book, *The Flight of the Creative Class: The New Global Competition for Talent* (Dreher, 2005). According to Florida, "students are the global canaries of this flow [of talent] – the U.S. has the largest number of students overall, but other countries have become better competitors. . . . the U.S. has become much more restrictive. [Those] restrictions have hit [foreign] students hard" (p.9).

Many international students discussed the quality of the program and reputation of UBC.

My high school has a strong affiliation with [an east coast university], everyone in my high school applied to that university, but it's not a very good university in Canada. And another one I applied was University of Toronto, but the weather there is not so very pleasant. (M-I)

I think UBC Arts because it's a very good program. . . . There're more choices. It seems like UBC offers a lot of choices for arts students, convenient for all Arts students in the whole school. . . . And the weather in Vancouver is also very nice . . . [unlike ] in Ontario or something, or even in Quebec. (F-I)

One Korean student indicated that in her country the University of Toronto is more highly regarded – "*it's basically the biggest university in the biggest city is the best university*" where "*they focus on more the graduate students than undergraduates.*" However, her ultimate goal was the University of British Columbia – "*the U of T's far.*"

Several international students compared the Canadian system with the higher education systems of the U.S. and their home countries.

In America . . . you have to go to private school to get a better education than a public school. And Canada offers very good programs. It's so much better than America or Korea. In Korea, they don't really focus on the critical thinking, they just focus on how to get a higher grade, and getting a higher grade. They don't really focus on human development, personal development, habit or thinking broad. (F-I)

I studied in Singapore for four years before I came here . . . . They pay more attention on the marks and grades there, and here they pay more attention to how you're thinking. In China and Singapore they . . . pay much attention what the good answers are for the questions, and now here they pay much more attention on how and why you get this answer. And another reason for coming here is I think here in Canada is less stressful than in China and in Singapore. (F-I)

Tuition fees and living costs were also important considerations when choosing a university. However, a higher standard of living was worth the extra cost. One international student was a Canadian citizen, which allowed him to avoid international tuition fees.

It's either the same or it's cheaper because you don't have that much tax. Probably tuition the same, but for living standard you have to pay more because there's taxes. (M-I)

Even if it was really more expensive to live here like studying than in Mexico, [my parents] were going to do it because of the living standards. Like, they were supporting my idea of coming here, it was not only because of the education but also the quality of life here in Canada. . . . Here it is more expensive, but it's worth it because it's like an investment. (M-1)

One student summed up the complex of factors in making her choice:

I know there, because I've applied U.S. and UK and Singapore universities also, but in the end I chose to come here because I found in the UK the tuition fee is too high, and for U.S. for Chinese it's quite hard to get a visa, and in Singapore although I got into that best university in Singapore it's still . . . I know it would be quite stressful compared to here. So I chose to come here. (F-1)

As indicated by these students' voices, both domestic and international students specified a multifaceted set of reasons for choosing UBC.

### ***EDUCATIONAL OBJECTIVES***

Next, focus group participants were asked to specify their educational objectives and to describe what they wanted to get out of their academic experience in terms of personal, social, and career goals.

Domestic students zeroed in on two areas – contacts within a good program and undergraduate studies as a stepping stone to further educational and career pursuits. Two female domestic students discussed the importance of contacts.

When you go to a school for [subject area<sup>2</sup>] you set up a whole bunch of contacts, and where you set up your contacts is where usually get your jobs in [subject area], where people know you. So, I decided that because B.C. is a great place for me to live, and in my future, I would want to go to school where there are people that knew me and where I could set up contacts, because Vancouver is so [subject area] alive it would be better for me. (F-D)

The contacts and the networking. Like, I think that if you go to school with people that are doing pretty-much the same thing you are it's just . . . you'll have the support, and it would be a good environment to be in all together. (F-D)

UBC was also perceived as a stepping stone to further education.

I want to go to medical school eventually, after I finish my Science degree, so I just wanted to come because UBC is such a good school, and I figure that if my Bachelor's degree is from here I'd have a really good chance of getting into a better medical school. (F-D)

I eventually want to go into the school of architecture they have here, so I'm going to get my engineering degree first. And I came here because, to get my degree, then I'll all be more familiar with a university and I will just continue from there. (F-D)

I want to get a Bachelor of Arts . . . . I want to take a Master's in journalism eventually, I think, but I can get a Bachelor. (F-D)

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<sup>2</sup> Faculties, departments and programs are not identified when it is possible to identify individual faculty members, staff or students.

For one student, both contacts and future studies were now part of her educational objectives.

I didn't realize it until I came here, but the contacts are amazing over here, I find, with all the international students. . . . And my school goal has been pretty set for a while, which is going into Nutritional Science, getting a degree in that, and going to med school physiologist. (F-D)

Other educational objectives included a broad range of experiences, preparation for a future career and interest in a particular field.

Some international students also perceived undergraduate studies at UBC as a stepping stone. For this student from Hong Kong, her goal was to be an urban planner with a B.A. and M.A from UBC.

I want to study geography and be a urban planner . . . . Hong Kong is such a crowded place that urban planning is really, really needed. . . . If I can do a Master's degree I would focus on urban planning. (F-I)

Other international students talked about the relationship between the reputation of UBC and their future careers.

In the future I plan to be a professor in economics, so that's why I choose to study at UBC, because UBC has the first rank . . . the Department of Economics has the first rank in Canada and around the world, which is very good, and it's a very high standard. . . . after here it's easy for me to go back to China and to become a professor. (M-I)

For me, I plan to go back to China . . . . To be a successful businessman I think in the future I have to speak English; I need to deal with lots of international groups, other foreign corporations. . . . And I can understand how to communicate cross-culturally, and communicate, to speak different language, and try to talk to people from different cultural backgrounds. It's very important. (M-I)

Quite frankly . . . if I go to UBC it's more internationally recognized, the name is, and that really says a lot because in here the normal credit education from Korea is from the best university they don't credit as you have to go over to your high school grade 11 and 12 credit, whereas if you study here . . . like, wherever you go your education will be recognized. (F-I)

Other international students compared the type of educational experiences they anticipated in their home countries to their current experiences at UBC.

It's like apples and oranges, right? The education system here focuses a lot on research and critical thinking, which is important, but I realize that not a lot of people here memorize their textbooks, so they're very good at school but then after that they forget everything they've learned, so that's not a good . . . credit. It doesn't mean you would be good enough. But in Hong Kong it's the other way around, everybody memorizes their textbook but they don't really know much about the real life, and don't know how to present themselves, so I'm trying to strike a balance between the two. (M-I)

Learning English was also an essential goal:

It probably opens up more options, in a sense, because I speak English and I get education based on English education, so that provides more chances, like I can work anywhere in the world, because now English is the most common language that everybody needs to learn. (F-I)



Independence and character development were described by a couple of international students as important personal goals.

I think it increases your sense of independence, because you're here by yourself and your parents aren't here, like, no, you can't call mom, "Can you do that for me!" . . . I think that's really important in personal development, and social, because you have to interact with other people. (F-I)

I would have been a different person if I still lived in Korea, because I have to go . . . there are so many difficult situations I have to get over that it's sort of I became more of a strong person . . . now I can go anywhere in the world and I'll be fine. (F-I)

One male student provided a very clear description of his objectives:

I have three main objectives. The first one's obviously to be independent. I come from Hong Kong and I've only been here for a month. The second is to learn how to express myself and to present and how to think critically because in Hong Kong the education system is basically you have a bunch of notes and you're supposed to memorize all those notes in your brain. I think that's a very good system, I'm not dissing the system, because that system allows us to widen our horizon and give us a fundamental knowledge base, but we can't memorize everything, so like I said I want to learn how to present myself as well as to think critically. The third one is probably the most important one, is to get a job. . . I don't really have any plans, but my thoughts are [that I will get a job] probably back home. (M-I)

Both international and domestic students articulated complex sets of goals and objectives in relation to attending UBC. For both groups of students, however, goals included preparation for future careers.

### *ADAPTING TO UBC*

Focus group participants were asked to describe their experiences adapting to UBC. Domestic and international students responded by drawing comparisons with their senior secondary years. For most students, the first two months as novice university students were perceived to be easier than high school.

I didn't find it that hard to adjust. I found . . . like, the first whole month I don't even think I opened a textbook, and I wasn't even behind! Like, I'd go to all my classes, and I just had a great time! Like, when mid-terms came around I was, like, "Oh, now I have to open and study," but it's really good. (F-D)

That was my big fear coming to university, I didn't know how I would be able to handle the big workload, but I've been finding that it hasn't been that hard to do that. (F-D)

For one domestic student, some of her first year courses were not challenging enough:

I'm in Arts, and I find the workload so far easier than high school. I don't know why, but it really surprised me. I was really kind of worried about was I even going to pass. But yeah, I found it not as much work, and I know in some of my courses I even feel like they're easier than high school was, which is kind of disappointment. (F-D)

Two domestic students disagreed that the workload was easier than her high school years.

Ooo-oo-oh. Yeah, it's been freaky. More so in the workload, definitely. Like, in high school you could just float by and get 70s, 80s, and be happy. But here it's like you have to work so hard, and then you're just barely passing. Or sometimes not. So, it's the adjusting part of it, it's totally different. (F-D)

I am on complete opposite of that. . . . I found it really easy. But then, with the workload, I'm so behind I can never catch up. The work is always there, especially in engineering. It's just totally frustrating. I get really stressed. I put my social life just aside and just focus on my work. (F-D)

Living in residence was described as a positive factor in adapting to university.

I find that our floor has really helped any transitional problems; we really had, because my parents [came] out from Ontario to help me move in, and the initial hour or two after they left it was kind of like, "Oh, my God, this is my decision. What am I doing here?" And I have . . . but after a day or two it was great. Like, our floor is amazing, we have so much fun together, and we tease each other to work harder. (F-D)

I totally enjoy being in res. (F-D)

Students acknowledged that their new found independence was accompanied by the need to be responsible and disciplined.

It's not so different from high school, but we are really independent. Like, the professors don't really care if you came to class. So, they don't care what you do. . . . So really have to have self control, you have to know that you have to go to class and do your work, because you have to hand your work like in high school, but if you don't do the work you know that if you get behind it's so hard to catch up. (F-D)

Others articulated that strategies for succeeding were required.

In terms of workload, I guess it's time management. If you know how to manage your time you'll do well. If you don't you're going to fall behind. I guess that's the way it is for me at least. (M-D)

Meeting friends was a challenge for some students.

The first week I was really homesick friends, and although I knew some fourth years they weren't my best friends, so I would find myself crying. . . . I was, like, "Okay, but at least it's nice here!" . . . But after a while . . . and it was really hard, I was surprised at how hard it was. . . . And I'm living on campus and I seem to be having the same problem. The only reason I know so many people now is I actually get out of my room and start to talk to people. And I'm thinking if you don't live on campus it must be so much harder to meet people. I was thinking it would be so easy in these classes, like, a hundred people, but you don't. Everybody's so "Mm" and walks out. (F-D)

I'm threatening to go home. I felt stupid first week. Now I love it but at first every time I called home I burst in tears. It's something really different here than I find in Ontario. I just feel like no one really relates to me. It's so hard to be with so many people but not being close to any of them. (F-D)

One domestic student described the faculty in her department and small class sizes contributing to her sense of wellbeing and belonging.

I think a big part of that is the faculty. . . . it's such a small faculty I have 15 or 20 people in my classes, and they're mostly the same people in my classes, so I get to know a whole bunch of people very well, which is really awesome. Like, the biggest class is my psychology class, which is an elective, and there's like 150 people in our class. But I find that made it really easy in terms of transition in our . . . faculty, because it's so small. (F-D)

Getting out of one's room, joining clubs, letting go of old friends and introducing oneself to new friends were described as positive strategies in adapting to university.

Once you take the initiative you can meet, like, twenty people, and we had so much in common with them, but you have to take the initiative, you just can't sit in your room and wait for friends to come to you. (F-D)

In contrast to comparing their university experiences with high school and focusing on friends and residents, international students described their first weeks at UBC as full of mishaps, misunderstandings, minimal information. They highlighted two particular sources of irritation – housing and on-line registration.

It was horrible the first time I came here, because I came here a couple of days earlier than housing was actually given to me, so I had to go around and find housing, and that was a very scary experience. I was lugging . . . I was pulling luggage throughout the town. Well, actually, eventually I found a house. I found a place to stay inside UBC, which was great, it was very convenient. (M-I)

According to this student, his residence space became available on August 30. However, in order to become oriented to completely new surroundings, he arrived a few days early, unaware that he needed to apply for early access to residence.

And I didn't apply! So I was stuck trying to find a place to stay, and that was horrible. (M-I)

International students agreed that housing was "pretty uncoordinated."

We were never really notified that we had to apply early if we were going to come early. I kind of had a similar problem. (F-I)

As the discussion continued, it became clear that adjustment problems started well before these international students arrived at UBC as students were required to register earlier in the summer. When asked whether they attended Orientation Week at International House, one student asserted that "*I just think international orientation itself is not enough because that comes after you arrive, right? You need something before, because that's after you're accepted, you've been here for like, and UBC should prepare students before coming here.*" The others agreed.

We had to register in August . . . no, in June or July, and I was in Hong Kong and I didn't know what to do, and nobody told me what to do. (M-I)

I was really excited because, like, my father went to university in the U.S., and he was an international student also, and he said that when he arrived he had to line up and register for the courses when he arrived. That's why I thought that the system of being able to register on-line beforehand was very effective, because then you didn't have to arrive here and figure all that out, that it was already figured out for you. But yeah, I think it is . . . I also had problems with their Internet, and there is no way anyone can help you because you're there alone, right, and there is no way you can look for help in your own country. So, yeah, in a way it's a very good way of communicating with the university, and if you know how to use the Internet you could get access to it, but if you have any problems there is no way you can rely on it 100% to help you understand. So, yeah, it can be a big problem, not being able to register for courses. I mean, you get here and there's, like . . . it's so hard to get into the courses because they're so full. Yeah, like housing is full; you have to do it beforehand. (F-I)

And there's isn't really much help from UBC. I don't know, it's bad - really bad - for me, like, just few options, there is not like a phone, like a world wide phone, a 1-800 number, because it's so expensive from the home country to arrange everything. And UBC is making a lot of money from us. (M-I)

It's poor coordination, like for international students . . . there's so many departments that work independently. And there is not such a relation between all of them. . . . it's screwing up most of the international students. (M-I)

Several students remarked on the lack of or poor coordination of services to assist students before they commenced their studies at UBC.

So it's coordination issue. So that's bad problem for UBC. (M-I)

One thing, for the amount of money that we pay for university we should be treated as more special than a \$3,000-paying ordinary Canadian citizen student. If you don't live . . . because I found out there's so much wrong with Registry Service on the Internet. My friend tried to do the mailing, and then she couldn't get any of her courses. She got her 5th or 6th choice courses because the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th had already filled up. And I sent her an e-mail. Like, they don't come back to you. Like, two weeks later I'm like, "Okay," but deadline is over now. (F-I)

Reliance on the internet has increased considerably over the past five years. According to the results of the CBIE (2004) 2004 international student survey, 84% of university students indicated that they had used the internet as a way of gaining information about deciding on post-secondary institutions. In 1998, this figure was 53%.

Although theoretically convenient, internet registration was not problem-free.

I had trouble with the Internet even if I was here because they don't tell you . . . like, UBC don't tell you how to register. Like, first of all I went in and opened up web pages, and I'm like, "Okay, I don't understand." Like, it took me a while to register. There's no explanation whatsoever. I guess they explain it all right but then the international students, people who live in their own home country, there should be more help provided, even a special e-mail system, like, Instant Message or whatever, because e-mail will come back two weeks later, it's like all reply it. (F-I)

I guess I just . . . I took the international orientation, but I guess the problem was that everything was done on-line beforehand, before I came to UBC, and I guess I was just not too familiar with the on-line procedures, and I had a problem with registering my courses. I had problems with finding a house to stay beforehand, because everything was on-line and there was no one to teach me or coach me, or demos. It was hard for me to understand what was going on. (M-I)

Not all students condemned the registration system. Two students claimed to have found all the information they needed.

I actually like the Internet system. I agree that it shouldn't be the only way to register, but it's just so much more convenient, and you're saying if your computer breaks down, but you could go somewhere else, your friend's house or something. . . . apart from the fact that if you have problems you should be able to e-mail them and get an answer quick, not wait a month and be like, "Oh, I forgot I actually sent that e-mail." (F-I)

I think that UBC has provided enough information, because before I came here I almost knew everything about here. I know where the ATM is . . . . I even got a map from UBC. I got everything from the UBC SAA, so I think if I can get there; it depends on your computer abilities. (M-I)

I did this all by myself. Yeah, I surfed on the Internet. . . . and I e-mailed to the four professors, and they replied very quickly, about in one or two days I got replies, and I decided which courses I needed at the end. And for the housing problems, as somebody mentioned, I checked on the Housing Department's Web site. They said very clearly that we can apply for early arrival, and when will the shuttle from the airport to student service begin. (M-I)

Others defended the UBC information system and suggested that navigating the internet was akin to training for real life experiences:

It's not just computers, though, I agree with that, because it's like preparing for real life, because when you go out and find a job they're not going to give you a detailed, "You have to do this and this and this," you have to find out yourself what you have to do and what you should be doing, which is partially why UBC is doing how to register, I looked at it and it took me a week to figure out how to put it all together, but if you do it beforehand it's like a planning system, it helps you learn how to plan, how to do things ahead, which I think is good. (F-I)

Some problems are not UBC's fault, because they cannot think that everything you need to know. . . . I think it's just suggestion that UBC should make something that will make it clearer, because I really spend a lot of time searching things like that. Of course, I finally got all the answers, but it took me a lot of time, even I'm not a beginner at computers. . . . Sometimes you cannot find answer directly, you need to ask somebody, and I think that there is one skill probably not to write an e-mail to the departments or to the faculty directly, try to write e-mails to the professors. (M-I)

I totally agree with that. . . . in a way, teaching us if you want to know something, figure it out yourself. I mean, they're not going to be there to answer every single question you have. . . . you have to find your own way. (F-I)

However, one student who was not completely convinced by this view, supported both sides of the debate:

I tried calling, and apparently nobody has ever thought that there's a time difference between Asia and the United States, or the North America, because every night I have to call at around 3:00 in the morning. I did everything you did, and much more. I called a professor. And it really depends on the different professors. Some professors, you e-mail them and they give you lots of information. Others, they don't really care, because you're not basically a student, and they can't put a name to your face. Some people even think you're sending viruses to them. So, a lot of my mail that I sent to professors asking for information, and which textbooks should I use, and can I view things beforehand, I didn't even get replies from them. I do have to applaud that there are . . . the interface was very comprehensive. However, though most of the information is on-line it doesn't mean most of the information you're able to grasp and get in the end, because it's just too cumbersome. (M-I)

Despite the annoyances articulated above, one student remained very positive about her experience so far:

Well, I can say that I've had a great time. I really . . . like, I appreciate UBC because of the effort they put on. I mean, even if . . . they have totally satisfied my expectations. From international orientation the people, the teachers, are excellent. The teachers I've had are excellent, you just can't stop admiring them because they really were prepared, and it looks like they love what they're doing. That's something I really enjoyed. And people, I mean, you don't . . . something about UBC is that you never feel like a foreigner, because everyone is from everywhere, so you feel like you're at home, and you're meeting people from everywhere. And something that's helped me so much is knowing that there are so many other students in my same situation, so we can all support each other, and we're going through the same transition from our own countries to here. (F-I)

International students were eager to offer recommendations for improving the transition process to UBC. Availability of an advisor to guide students through the registration process before the beginning of classes, a UBC representative in their home countries, a forum to post questions and get quick responses, a person in each department responsible for incoming international students, registration sessions right after students are admitted, and having a number of people available on MSN to answer questions would be helpful. One student recommended better cafeteria hours and another wanted a more streamlined system of transfer credit.

## ***SOCIAL INTEGRATION***

As indicated in the literature review, the concept of social integration focuses on the quality of peer group interactions and the quality of student interactions with faculty. Successful social and academic integration are considered necessary components which in turn lead toward institutional commitment by the student.

In this section, we focus primarily on social integration outside the classroom setting and is considered under the following headings: making friends, social life and loneliness.

### ***Making Friends***

Students were asked to discuss their friends – who they were and how they met them. Domestic students indicated that this process was facilitated by the residence peer advisors.

I moved in on . . . the first day, and so there were maybe two other people on my floor. And so my parents had just left, I was sitting in my room, I'm just like, "Oh, God, what am I going to do now?" But our advisors came down and knocked on all the doors and said, "We're all going to dinner together to get to know each other." That was so good, and I think that made it really easy to meet all other people and make more friends more quickly. (F-D)

Others described residence as a natural setting to be introduced to and acquainted with others:

I think the majority of the friends I've made have been in my residence, because you're living with them every day, all the time, like, 4 o'clock in the morning. Yeah, I really like being so close to people that you like. It's really nice. (F-D)

Domestic and international commuters viewed those who were living in residence with envy.

I was kind of envying [those who live in residence] because here are all these parties. . . . Just because I have to get home before it gets dark, because it's creepy on campus when it's dark . . . I didn't really stick around for many of the parties. . . . And the people I do meet, it's just people around my classes, just people around me. And I don't know, there's no closeness in that, because every single time you meet you just talk shop, or they'll just talk, "How was the assignment? How was the test?" blah blah blah. I have the feeling that there's really no connection. (F-D)

I am not meeting people. . . . It's different when you are in class discussion you can talk to students. After class I'm, like, poor loner. It's so sad, right? (M-D)

I live in home stay family in Richmond, and I just cannot keep with relationships . . . I made no friends here. . . . I don't even have the chance. I mean, I'm not staying at UBC, I'm not living in the dorms, so I don't even have the chance to be in contact. (M-I)

Tinto (1997) defines universities as learning organizations where classrooms and curriculum are reorganized to promote shared, collaborative learning experiences among students. He describes the benefits of learning communities by asserting that students become actively involved in classroom learning after class. New students spend more time learning together; these students form social groups outside their classrooms, as learning communities enable students to bridge their academic and social lives. Constructing a coherent first-year educational experience is particularly important if the goal is to facilitate the transition of students into university life.

As commuter students clearly indicate, their transition into university life was hampered by the time it took to commute, limited opportunity to meet and talk with students during class time and minimal contact with residential students after class.

Domestic students asked each other whether they participated in "*that MUG thing*" – My Undergraduate Group. According to the UBC web site, MUG sessions are led by "experienced and enthusiastic" UBC students who meet with incoming students on the first day of school (Imagine Day) and maintain contact over the first semester. When asked whether MUG was successful students answered as follows:

No. (F-D)

I was just totally disoriented. (F-D)

I didn't get a lot out of it; it was, you know, I met some people. (F-D)

You're meeting people, but it's just such a big event I think you get more out of it if you already have a little bit of previous knowledge from people at school, whereas I didn't plan to go, I didn't find myself taking all the information that we need, because I was trying to get basic stuff, where is Main Mall and where is Lower Mall. (F-D)

And I find that really hard, too, to recall the names that you've having thrown at you. It's, like, "I recognize your face and I'm sorry, but that's it." (F-D)

I could see everybody, but in class I'd be, like, "Hey, you!" "I met you before?" That was a big problem for me. That was really bad. Definitely the names, hard to take in. (F-D)

Domestic students were thrilled, however, to meet students from other countries.

It's amazing. I was so shocked that hardly anybody I met was from B.C. Everyone's from . . . all over the world. (F-D)

International students also described the university scene as very welcoming.

I find that people here are really friendly. Like, it's very easy . . . they're easy to talk to. I haven't yet found any individual problem, and people are very open. They're easy-going all the time. That's what I like. (F-I)

One student described how he made friends with Canadians before he arrived in Canada:

Before I came to Canada, UBC I have made some friends in Canada because we chat on-line, and each other's name on-line, and we even . . . even I think we developed a very good relationship with friends on-line before I came here, and even we choose the same timetable, we choose the same classes, we have a lot of things in common. (M-I)

A few students attributed the friendliness of Canadians to their ability to "*admit diversity*."

They allow us to have our own culture. We can do our own things. I think that's probably the same in . . . I think the main reason is because there are a lot of Chinese here, so it's very . . . I can meet Chinese everywhere, every time, so it won't be a big problem for me. (M-I)

Canada prefers that people should . . . retain their culture behaviour, cultural independence. . . . They can keep their culture and still interact with all the other people in the sense that UBC is like small Canada. You get so many people from each culture. (F-I)

One student acknowledged that his difficulty making friends was related to his ability to communicate in English:

Up to now I still haven't made really close friends among Canadians or even other students from different countries. . . . My English is not that good, and it's just that the words for some of the jokes . . . when they talk about the jokes I don't even understand what they're talking about, and I cannot dissolve myself into their communities. This is the main problem I find, but in general everyone is very nice. (M-I)

For another student, less than perfect English language skills were not a huge disability:



In my opinion, my room-mates are really, really great. They are so good. I'm just the same as them. Although my English isn't too bad sometimes I can't fully understand what they are talking about, what they are laughing about, I still find I'm part of them. (F-I)

When asked the nationalities of their friends, the response by international students was mixed. Some said "*Chinese*" whereas others described the nationalities of their friends as "*half and half*."

I've got many friends from Hong Kong, we speak Cantonese together, and we share stuff like Hong Kong style together. And because I live in the dorm and all my house stay are not Chinese. So, all my friends from dorm all Canadian, but I find no problem with going out with them. I enjoy hanging out with them; we can watch TV or a movie together. (F-I)

A student from Mexico described how he avoided students from his own culture and sought out the company of Canadians:

Well, I find that there is not exactly integration between Canadians and internationals. Most of the time I see Asians with Asians, Latinos with Latinos, and so on. Canadians are still friendly . . . [but] there is a difference between pals and friends. Like, you can hang out with . . . you can share a class together and talk to them, but it's not like you're friends with them. . . . I want to be having more Canadian friends, and know the Canadian way. And I'm trying to avoid people from Mexico, and Latinos, because I come from there so I already know that. (M-I)

In contrast, a female Mexican student described her experience exchanging cultural practices with her friends:

I think since I got here I love that I'm meeting so many friends from so many cultures. My friends are, like, one from Japan, and the others are from the U.S., and whenever I see someone from Mexico I'm so excited, and it's like, "Oh!" and I start shouting and speaking in Spanish, we talk so much in Spanish . . . I feel like I have to represent my country to Canada, and I feel so proud of being Mexican, and I'm sharing my culture with the other people. . . . I always kiss everyone, and sometimes my friends are, like . . . my girlfriends, you know, because in Mexico we kiss when we say hello and good-bye and things like that, and we touch a lot. . . . And my Japanese friends are showing me how to bow, how they do it there, and how they pray, and how they eat, and everything. Most of my friends I've made are from my dorm, so I think it's very, very important to be a first-year and to be living in residence. That's a big difference. My whole life is in residence. I have the best time ever. That is what makes my life here in university so wonderful. (M-I)

Within the first two months of attending UBC, for the most part both international and domestic students were pleased with their relationships with other students.

### ***Social Life***

Focus group participants were asked to describe their social lives. Some were active party goers and keen on "clubbing." Others participated in sports clubs. Domestic students pointed out how many of the activities for first year undergraduates were alcohol related.

[In residence] . . . I found all persons drink. Like, just like me every night there was a certain theme of drinking. (F-D)

For those under 18 years of age, non-drinkers, or those from countries who do not condone alcohol consumption, the university social scene – on campus and off – presented some challenges.

I don't drink, so I don't go to any of the beer gardens or anything, so I have to find other ways to meet new people, because when everyone's drunk you don't really get to know them that well! (F-D)

F: A lot of things are alcohol-based, whether or not you choose to drink. Everything's clubs or bars or whatever. There's nothing really for people that are underage in Vancouver, not really too much on campus. (F-D)

I know some international students, there's one he's from Egypt, he lives right across from a friend, and he still to this day hasn't gone out yet. We're always going out to alcohol . . . we'll go to pubs, we'll go out clubbing, and he just can't get out. He's just, like, cannot go. There's a dance coming up . . . and it's alcohol-free. . . . and they're allowing younger people. (F-D)

International students discussed their social life on different terms. According to one student,

there's always something going on. There's such a party every day. We have lunch with everyone. Dinner-time everyone goes to the cafeteria, everyone's there, and you meet so many people, and it's so beautiful to be there. You wake up and there's friends walking down the hallways. Everyone's in the same term and everyone's in the same situation. (F-I)

International students' social lives seemed to revolve around residence:

I can make friends in dorm, and many Hong Kong people . . . like, I know many from before today. (F-I)

I think both because many Chinese students live in dorm, the Chinese students, from Japan, Korea and Australia, they were everywhere, and then it's fun. (F-I)

When asked about International House, it received mixed reviews:

They have great programs. They have a language circle. We also have buddy systems, and numerous occasions, we have parties. (M-I)

I just bother not going there because every time I go here I saw mainly Hong Kong people and Chinese people, so there is . . . I don't know, it's like a Chinese House rather than an International House. I don't know why. Every time I go there I feel like that. (F-I)

Some international students joined the Peer Program offered through International House where they are matched with Canadian students. Again, this program received mixed reviews.

I and my peer keep in close contact. We have lunch every week, one or two times, and she is one of my very best friends here. (F-I)

I'm in the program but my peer, she's Chinese, she's mostly Chinese, and she's not *Canadian* Canadian. It's almost the same thing we don't like to keep in touch. . . . I was expecting a *Canadian* Canadian. (F-I)

My peer is local Canadian, and he's much older than me, and he's in the same faculty as me, and so it's kind of good. And we share a lot of stuff, like study in the library. Because we have totally different culture, and he's very interested in what happened in Singapore, and what happened in China. . . . So, yeah, we are good friends now. . . . we meet once a week, usually. (F-I)

I joined the peer program but I haven't met my peer yet, because she didn't show up on the first day, and we haven't met at each other, and we're trying to find a day to meet. We also have group activities, like maybe fifteen to twenty people in the group, and they get meet more people and go and meet people or something. We decide to go out and where to go to eat. (F-I)

Westwood and Barker (1990) found that at the University of British Columbia, international students who were paired with a Canadian student providing support in first year achieved higher grades than international students who were not paired. However, as the students in the current study indicate, the quality of the encounter is also important.

Both domestic and international students who commuted to campus lamented their lack of friends and wanted a social life. Travelling distances also posed a challenge for commuter students.

I don't live on campus, I drive my sister to school and then we both meet people, I only talk to them if they need help with homework. We don't even hang out outside school because I don't live on res and I think they don't live on res either. (F-D)

I don't live in dorms on campus. I can't believe there's no social life. It's still hard to make friends . . . . We come from one lecture and then the other lecture, you meet I guess one person from this lecture, but then if you don't see them until the next day or two days later, then you can't really develop a friendship . . . . there's only a little time to talk. (F-I)

There's one important thing, that in Canada you have to have the driver's license. It doesn't matter if you live off campus. . . . the most important is to have to have a car. I remember that in the Thanksgiving week, three days . . . I stayed at home for three days, and I . . . . there was no one who was going to drive me. . . . The nearest bus is probably fifteen minutes' walk. (M-I)

Commuters in this study report very different in- and out of class experiences than those experienced by students living in residence. The experiences they described were not optimal.

### ***Loneliness***

Both international and domestic students who lived in residence described varying degrees of loneliness. For a few, campus life was too hectic to experience loneliness.

Never. There are too many things to do. (F-I)

You have no time to feel lonely. I promise. I probably have no time; I have to really want to be alone. People come knocking on my door, "Go away, I'm trying to sleep!" You know? Sometimes . . . I mean, you wake up and there are your friends out there, and then you go for breakfast and all your friends are there, and then you go to class and you meet your friends again, and then you come back and your friends are there. You get into your room and there's friends knocking on your door, "We want to talk with you!" (F-I)

For others, feelings of loneliness at the beginning of the term quickly dissipated:

There're definitely times when I miss my friends at home, but I don't think I've had, like, a truly bad loneliness in quite a while. Just, there's so many people that you are able to get closer to, I find, like within residence, walk next door and go talk to someone there. . . . I find it really easy to talk to them, people. (F-D)

I find that I was lonely the first day. That initial day was pretty rough. Now . . . like, I haven't been home since the end of August, and I'm starting to miss people at home, but I'm never lonely. I have a great floor, it's amazing, we have so much fun. (F-D)

I think I was feeling lonely during the first two weeks here. . . . You have friends just saying hi and . . . . You can start from hi-bye friend and then they'll ask, "How do you do?" after one month if hi-bye, and then you are going to share about things today. And after sharing this for a month, then you two will move onto things more in-depth like boyfriends or girlfriends . . . . and keep secrets. (F-I)

For others, loneliness remained palpable. Interestingly, the international males described themselves as the most lonely.

Although I live on campus . . . I find sometimes I really feel very lonely because I'm not lacking of friends, I have a lot of friends, but friends I have different kinds of friends, not close ones. Because it's . . . probably for me, personally, I think it's very hard to find a very close friend in a different culture. I cannot do this. Probably somebody else he can, but I cannot. So, my closest of friends, they are all from the same culture. And I think that if you want to build a very, very close friendship, and very good friends, you need a lot of time. Two months is not long enough. Probably one year or two years or more. So I think that's why. For sometimes if I have some very serious difficulties, I have nobody to talk about . . . . At that time I would try to call back to my friends in China. . . . I know some people that are very open, they build their friendships very quickly, but I'm not the kind of person, I build my friendships very, very slow. (M-I)

The transition is so hard. (M-I)

Commuters, both domestic and international, had a different take on loneliness:

I haven't felt lonely also because . . . . takes me about three hours, 3 busses and a sky train to get home . . . . I'll go home. . . and then stay with my friends. . . When I get homesick, I can go home, but I'm also here [on campus] and kind of lonely. (F-D)

I find myself too busy at school. . . . I've had to put my social life on hold because of all mid-terms, and the second round mid-terms and third round mid-terms, I find that interferes a little. (F-D)

It's ironic that you are surrounded with, like, 40,000 people and still feel alone, but that is so true. . . . I didn't get a residence. . . [at] times I felt lonely because it's hard to really meet people, friends are even worse . . . . I knew people, and I talked to them, but the next day I never see them again. It's like meeting phantoms. . . . So that's a sad thing. (M-D)

A few domestic students from traditional families described how their relationships with their parents were changing.

When I was in high school I really liked being out with my friends, I always wanted to go and stuff, but my parents were really strict on that, they are traditional family. But then once I get home since September my parents are so easy and I can always say I spent so much time on tutorials and projects and stuff. So sometimes I don't go home until, like, 9:00 or 10:00, 10:30. I don't know why . . . like, my parents let me go with my friends and stuff, but then I found I want to spend more time with my family. (F-D)

I came from traditional family too. My parents are so strict, and I do have this new-found freedom, but it's more like I feel guilty if I don't do the things that they used to impose on me. It's just kind of like, you know, while I do want to go out and have fun I kind of have to study, and I've followed that. So it's the whole balance thing that you have to find. (F-D)

Throughout high school I kind of went through the stage where. . . I would rebel to my parents completely in high school. . . for Thanksgiving I didn't go home. . . for Christmas . . . I want to go home and see my friends at parties, and I also really want to spend a lot of time with my family. (F-D)

For most students, loneliness experienced during the first few days or weeks was transient. However, for a few students, making friends was more challenging. Commuter students expressed the most difficulty with friendship formation on campus. However, if their home lives were fulfilling, then loneliness was less of an issue.

### ***HEALTH ISSUES***

Focus group participants were asked to discuss any health problems they had experienced since starting university. Domestic students talked about minor illnesses such as colds and flu, combined with unhealthy lifestyles.

I don't think it's healthy to pull two all-nighters in a row, but it's just you don't have a choice, right? (F-D)

Strategies included napping: "*Naps had become a very integral part of my day, more so than ever before. Napping is wonderful,*" taking advantage of the fitness rooms in residence and "*walking from one side to the other side of the campus.*" The fitness facilities are considered to be quite good:

It's open 24/7. It's got, like, a couple beds and a huge rowing machine, and there's a Stairmaster, Treadmill. And it's being nice to have. (F-D)

In the international focus group the discussion and debate (and confusion) focussed on care cards and health care coverage in Canada. Students were confused about nature of the insurance – was it public or private, when insurance coverage began, how to get care cards, and the role of the AMS in student health care coverage. One student, who believed she did not have health care coverage did not seek medical attention.

When I was sick two weeks . . . I just stayed in my dorm, not to see my doctor. (F-I)

Others offered the following advice to this student:

You're covered right now. (F-I)

If you paid MSP your insurance is covered by the provincial insurance company. (M-I)

AMS only pays for three months, so that after that three months you'll get . . . the MSP card. (F-I)

Before MSP and before the AMS insurance applies, and you also have another kind of private insurance. (M-I)

At the end of this conversation, focus group participants remained confused.

When asked specifically about their health, several international students claimed that since arriving at UBC, they were more healthy.

I think I've become healthier, because I walk a lot, and I will certainly say that the UBC swimming pool is excellent. They've got free sessions, so if you have time you should go there. It's very clean. The water's very clear. (M-I)

I think my health has been improved since I've got here, because I walk more than I used to walk in Hong Kong. (F-I)

When I came my health wasn't as good as I thought it would be. I suppose jet lag . . . So I found it hard to sleep for the first week. And then the food here wasn't the same, because apparently here people don't eat vegetables. People here eat . . . it's like a horror movie to them . . . because I clicked on the TV and people were, like, afraid of eating broccoli. (M-I)

However, for this student, his health gradually improved.

I found different ways to substitute the food that I used to have at home. . . . it's a matter of time. As time passes by you know what options of food you're more accustomed to and you can choose that. (M-I)

The change in diet was a concern for other students:

When I came to Canada I started to have a choice of my food. . . . I try not to eat too much junk food that's too oily that it'll be unhealthy, and also because I'm more alone now I have. . . . I try to keep myself eating healthy so I won't get sick and neglect my studies and so on. It's mostly that I became more concerned of my health. (M-I)

A few students also identified meal schedules as problematic:

There's some problems here because we choose a time-table that cannot allow me to eat every dinner on time, sometimes I eat dinner before eleven, sometimes I eat dinner after 2:00, 2:30. I think that might be a problem. And because before I came here I got some problems with my stomach. . . . I need to eat about four times per day, or five times a day, at least, and at each meal I eat less. But here I cannot do this. . . . I probably sometimes I only eat two meals because I get up very late, because I studied very late at night so I get up late, and combine my breakfast and lunch together. And sometimes I have my supper very late. So my stomach got a lot of problems. And I find that people here, they like to drink coffee. Yeah, a lot of people drink coffee, so I try to drink coffee but it's very . . . it hurts my stomach very, very badly. (M-I)

I have to change my food. Like, I have to eat breakfast very early so I have lunch at 12:00, and you're not hungry. Yeah, the times for eating have changed, but it's okay. I walk a lot, and the air is fresh. (F-I)

Despite various health and dietary complaints, the students in this study did not report any major health concerns.

## ***THE COST OF UNIVERSITY***

As stated earlier in this report, the cost for undergraduate tuition for international students ranged from \$15,000 to \$19,000. Domestic undergraduate students paid approximately \$3500 in tuition costs in their first year. Not surprisingly, students – and in particular, international students – had strong opinions about tuition and other related costs.

### ***Tuition Costs***

In general, residence and the meal plan, at around “\$360 a month” was considered by domestic students to be comparable to other universities and is a good deal.

It’s about the same if you were going to get an apartment with three of your girlfriends, or whoever. And you get so many extras! (F-D)

Everything is so close. (F-D)

The extra fees, “*the \$30 here and there in service fees*” were described as “*really worth it because . . . you just have so many good programs.*” One student described herself as “*babied*” because of the availability of appliances such as washers, dryers, microwaves, stoves, and fridges. “*All these little things – it’s good.*”

For one student who shared an apartment and paid around \$800 a month, living off campus with strict non-partying rules “*helps us not get distracted from studying. I don’t know if I could survive on res because I have really bad discipline.*”

I find that that’s a good thing for me, because I’m, like, focus now. You’ll do fine on your own! I just keep my door open and I study, because I like watching people go by, and really try not to get distracted by it, you can do it while they go by. (F-D)

Some domestic students paid for their own tuition, which they described as making them more independent.

It also helps, like, you don’t want to fail your courses, you want to pass. (F-D)

Exactly. Like, I’m paying, what, \$300 for . . . this course, I’m not going to skip that class. (F-D)

I find in high school it’s just, like, you blow off classes, right, but now you’re paying for it. (F-D)

The discussion on costs was considerably more lively in the international focus group. One student had actually calculated the comparative cost of attending a class for international and domestic students.

Oh, our lectures are cancelled sometimes. Let’s say the professor’s ill, or they’re busy at a conference and the lecture’s cancelled, right, and I don’t learn anything. But then, like, for domestic students they pay like \$4 a lecture, whereas the international students they pay like, what, \$80. (F-I)

International students asserted that fees for international students at UBC were too high. One student questioned whether the higher costs were worth it.

For UBC it's higher than other universities in Canada. . . . I think it's one of the highest. It's really . . . well, the standard of education, it's pretty good, but it's still like for that price . . . . It's my first year, right, but still I think that for what we're paying we can get maybe the same at a cheaper university, and then just transfer to your third year or fourth year, and last year you've got the same as all these guys. (M-I)

And I really don't like that we have to pay for extra activities like clubs, or like sport facilities like swimming pool. Or, I don't know, the swimming pool and the gym, I think it's really over the line that we have to pay . . . like, all those additional things. I don't know, I find that the university's making a lot of money, because it's like a business, it's not like they charge the whole thing, right? So, all these extra things, I don't know how conscious they are about these. (M-I)

High fees charged by some specific departments were not appreciated and deemed unfair because they were required to “*pay more for one credit than arts students or science students.*”

[As] Commerce students, we need to pay a very high Commerce Undergraduate Society fee, it's about \$200. I think it's the highest society fee among different faculty. I heard that Arts, their society fee is very low, but ours you need to pay about \$200, but I really don't know where the money goes. (M-I)

Whereas domestic students described extramural fees as fair, international students questioned the extent to which they benefited from these levies.

“So much money!” “Oh, \$1 per person, a couple dollars for AMS fees,” but . . . . where does the money go? . . . Gym costs . . . . pool. . . . there's no need for it, right? And then all these extra \$500 for something that I don't know where it's going, or I don't know that I will be using, kind of like a waste of money. . . . But it goes for the better good of the university, but what good comes to me for paying it? (F-I)

We have to pay fees for . . . I think it's called for the sport area, facilities. Now we have already paid so let's use it, then we find that we have to pay another fee. So it's always like fees over fees over fees, and it's endless. And we have to keep in mind that university's a business, it's not like . . . they are not here to give away education. . . . they are making money. (M-I)

Interestingly, this student concluded that UBC was a private institution. “*It's [a] private institution so it's not in any way subsidized by the government but still making money.*”

### ***Scholarships***

When asked whether they had received scholarships, most of the domestic students said “no.” Those from Ontario commented that their friends attending Ontario universities received at least \$2000. According to one student from Ontario, “[of] everywhere I applied, this was the only place I didn't get money from.” Domestic students described the competition for scholarships as fierce.



My high school was so competitive . . . if anybody actually got a scholarship their marks were up in the high 95s. (F-D)

I know my school, the people that do get the scholarships were up in, like, 98 and above per cent, so I wasn't there! (F-D)

I found that you either had to have incredibly high grades and be a good person, volunteer to help with little kids and all this kind of stuff. . . they're so selective. (F-D)

One student described her experiences spending “*hours and hours on scholarship applications*” only to receive a few small awards. Scholarships from UBC were regarded as particularly difficult to attain:

I don't think scholarships through UBC – you had to be really smart to get them, or you'd have to be poor to apply for bursary. . . You can't really blame [UBC] because they can't give money to everyone, but it just kind of sucks. (F-D)

Such experiences have led to application exhaustion:

There's so many people competing . . . I'm not going to waste time because scholarship application – [it] takes time to apply. (F-D)

Domestic students recommended that the availability of provincial scholarships and financial support within faculties be increased. International students shared their frustration with the lack of scholarship money available, especially in light of the costs they incurred to study at UBC.

And they're making a lot of money out of international students . . . that's a really big problem. I got informed about Canadian scholarships, and they offer \$2500 a year if we get over 85%. That's next to impossible [to achieve]. (M-I)

Even if it were possible, \$2500 was considered to be a paltry sum:

Say if you get 85%, and \$2500, that's not enough. How many courses does it cover? One or two, maybe? (F-I)

Textbooks. (F-I)

Information about scholarships was described as hard to find:

I think UBC should have more information about international student scholarships, because I've talked to the information desk in Brock Hall, they said, “We're not sure. There are those student loans, but you have to go check with International House.” I mean, like, they just assume international students are all rich. I think we should have more scholarships. (F-I)

Other universities were perceived to be much more generous in supporting international students. Some international students openly considered transferring to other universities to complete their studies.

At UBC because now they try to unfreeze the tuition fee. I know University of Alberta offers much more scholarships to international students, and their tuition fees are like one-third cheaper than it should be. But it really costs, let's say, because they keep increasing it, so there's always a chance that if I transfer to some other university if they offer a higher scholarship and the tuition fees are cheaper then. (F-I)

A couple of students raised the issue of the wisdom of completing an undergraduate degree abroad. For this Mexican student, he initially thought attending UBC for undergraduate studies would increase his employment opportunities. With barely eight weeks of study completed, he had already begun to rethink this strategy.

Maybe we study at our home universities [for undergraduate] and then make a Master's degree here. . . . A university Bachelor's is becoming like a high school degree. It doesn't really matter what you finish your degree in, you can still go into Economics for your Master's, and that makes a difference. . . . So it doesn't really matter where you finish your undergrad studies. You could finish in Hong Kong and then come here and still have the same opportunities at a lower price. (M-I)

Undergraduates – it's not so important where you get the degree as long as they're like University of U of A, it's not like they have a low reputation or anything, so it kind of like making some students to move to other places than UBC because UBC fees are going up. (F-I)

One student defended the high costs for international students:

When Canadian students go abroad and study in the U.S. and then they have the same fee than US, they pay a lot as well. . . . we chose to study here, you know? No one forced us. . . . I don't know whether it's true or not - native Canadians are working here and they have to pay 30% of their salary for the tax. So our parents are not paying into this country, so maybe that's the reason we have to pay so much. (F-I)

However, all of the international focus group participants concurred early increases in tuition fees were troubling. Also, they had a considerable amount to say about residence fees.

I think the fees that they are charging for residences are so high. Compared to outside the university, to living off-campus, it's cheaper, but I don't know, I thought maybe they are not making a profit out of residences, but then I found out that living in a frat house is a cheaper price, so then I realized that these guys are still making money out of residences and meal plans. . . . So, still I think it's not a bad deal, but it's not the greatest. (M-I)

The cost of compulsory meal plans in residence were considered “*too high.*”

Because I live in Vanier and I need to pay for the meal plan. And for the meal plan, we got overhead, it's a very high fee. I calculated \$1,000. I see per month you need to pay about over \$200 for overhead. That means if you didn't eat anything you need to pay \$200. I guess it calculates what I spend on my food, I spend about - including overhead - I spend about \$400 per month on food, but I don't think I eat very well. . . . Sometimes I also still feel hungry. And I also have some friends, they just do their cooking for themselves, they only spend about \$100 to \$200 per month, but we need to pay about \$400 per month. So I think that overhead doesn't make sense. (M-I)

Otherwise you can just live off-campus, they don't care. UBC don't care! (F-I)

I just wanted to say I live in a frat house but I cook my meals, and I'm spending around \$150 a month cooking by my own, and breakfast, lunch, two meals. So it's pretty good. So, yeah, I can see how much money they are making . . . out of each student that is paying a meal plan. (M-I)

Costs, whether tuition, extra fees or residence fees, were of particular concern to international students. Domestic students seemed to take the costs in stride.

### ***THE CULTURE OF THE UNIVERSITY***

Students were asked to describe the culture of the university. Although described as culturally "*very diverse*," domestic students commented on the concentration of certain racial/ethnic groups in some faculties and departments.

I'm in Commerce Math - and I'm, like, totally the minority. . . . I knew B.C. was going to be very Asian, but I was shocked to see how Asian it was compared to Toronto. (F-D)

Students from Toronto also commented on the dearth of Black students on campus.

I was just surprised to see . . . how few blacks there were. I think I see about four on campus. Where are they? I'm on the basketball team, and there's no black people playing on the team! I find it so odd. (F-D)

For one domestic student from a small town, the ethnic diversity was a welcome change.

I think it's totally cool here. Like, I love meeting so many different people from . . . there's a girl on my floor in res and she's so interesting. . . . She'd never experienced Halloween before. So it's so cool. And we like to share that with her. So it's a total change, but I think it's a good one. (F-D)

Other domestic students agreed that the cultural diversity of UBC was very welcome and enjoyable.

I love it. I love to travel and meet people from so many different places. It's so amazing, it's so interesting, and to think they might be from totally different backgrounds and we can still talk together. (F-D)

I learned about other cultures. Like, I learned so many things, small things about every day life in different areas, but things you can't learn in school that you can learn from other people, not through reasoning skills. (F-D)

There's a girl upstairs who taught me about her religion. She was from Scotland originally, and she lived in Vancouver for a couple years, but it was kind of neat because I had no idea. You don't learn that in a [subject area] class, right? (F-D)

Domestic interviewees commented on the difference between high school and university. Whereas high school was described as "*all cliquey. You have a group and stick to it all your life. If you fell in with the wrong group then you're screwed*," university was described as "*so much more accepting of everyone, it's really so nice*."

In big classes, I find that everyone's so tolerant of different cultures. In high school there's not really hatred, huge, but people are generally in the dark about different things, whereas here there's just so much more knowledge and respect. (F-D)

I found a lot of people in high school like East Indian, you have groups like that, and no one is racist of anyone but you did kind of classify them. Everybody would have a classification, whereas here it's just so much more open. (F-D)

One student spent one year as an international student in south-east Asia. In this school, students came from all over the world. However, upon returning to attend high school in Canada, *“it was hard . . . there's a lot of segregation.”* Now, at university, the inclusive, multicultural atmosphere returned.

I'd see students walking around, Chinese, Indian, white, black, whatever, a different mix walking together, and that was really cool to see that. It . . . represents the culture of BC and how diverse it is. Especially UBC. (M-D)

Also, domestic students discussed how exposure to people from different cultures was shaping their world views:

I find it's so good that [in first year] . . . we're so accepting of everybody else. I think it's really going to be good when we have kids, we are so open. . . . That's why bigger universities are better, in my opinion. It's better because there's so much more . . . like, they attract so many different people. (F-D)

According to one student from an urban/rural area in B.C. *“there's the high school where most of the white kids go, and then there's the high school across the river where all the East Indian kids go. Very separate, not a lot of mixing.”* In contrast, university was described as *“very refreshing to come here and see everyone, so many different backgrounds all together, so I love it here.”*

In contrast, international students said very little when asked about cultural diversity. One student offered the following:

Well, I still think that there are distinctions between cultures, Asians with Asians, Latinos with Latinos, Canadians with Canadians. There is not such a thing as integration pretty formed yet, I hope. . . . [The] Black community here in UBC is pretty low. . . . so black people are still pretty small here. So I cannot imagine how they live because they don't have a lot of people like them. (M-I)

However, when asked whether, since arriving on campus, they perceived that they were treated differently, either inside in the campus or outside the campus because they were international students, the response was a clear *“no.”*

### ***ACADEMIC WORK***

Students were asked to describe their academic work in terms of whether it was easier or harder than they had expected. Domestic students had already addressed this topic when they were asked to describe adjusting to university. Their responses were consistent with their earlier statements. Having heard *“horror stories,”* they described themselves as bracing for a heavy workload and a drop in grades.

I think it's easier. When I came into it I was, like, "Oh, my gosh, I'm going to fail all my courses." I'd heard all these rumours about how . . . like certain percentage of people drop out from second year. Like, some of them not being here next year. So it was kind of like it was not bad mentality that university is, because I was so scared. But I guess it made me work really hard until I got into the groove and now I am okay with that. Now I have to do my work, I can't skip. (F-D)

I find it easier, the workload, than I expected. I know in talking to second years that have gotten there, too, a lot of them tell me jokes, just have fun and pass and you'll be fine, and I've actually found it quite easy to get decent marks, just doing something that you want to do. (F-D)

They continued with their comparisons with high school.

I think it's a lot easier for me in many aspects because it's what I want to be doing. . . . So it's all stuff that I understand and makes sense to me, so it's a lot easier than high school when I took biology and math. Now I don't have to take those. (F-D)

With high school everything was due the next day, the next day. This is, like, you have an assignment due, and you know it's due on that date, you should get it in by that date and you're fine. It doesn't matter when you really do it, as long as you do a decent job when you have to. And that's what I did, that's why I don't find it as hard a place. High school was, I find, totally different than university. University's, like, you're on your own, you're doing what you want to do. (F-D)

Two students maintained that they found university much more difficult.

I found it a lot harder! In high school I was able to get really good marks just by not really doing anything. When I came here, just the homework all the time, when you're not doing all you're feeling guilty, you know you're starting to fall behind. . . . It was a little hard for me to adjust to . . . the good marks that you expect to drop. . . . I remember my first marks that I got back from my Chemistry. Like, the mid-term and the average was 40%, and I was just, like, "Oh, my God." . . . I'm starting to get used to it now, but I found it really, really hard to adjust. (F-D)

One engineering student agreed:

I used to get really, really good grades in high school because it was pretty easy, I didn't have to do much. And here I have to do so much work. And my classes are in the morning so it's all the keen people that are really smart, that are taking all the A courses and everything, so it's really competitive, and they all do really well, and I find I'm always below average, I'm always trying . . . work harder and do more, and trying – I just find it a lot of work to do and to catch up. (F-D)

International students' perceptions of difficult and easy courses were quite different. Several students claimed that everything was easier, with the exception of English.

Everything is easier except English. I found that the maths here is just so easy compared to Hong Kong, although I'm an Arts student. (F-I)

Yeah, math here is easy for me, and I have a very high mark in math, but English or any subject related to English, for example if I have to write an essay . . . I got very low marks on the essays. I'm so disappointed about that because just because my English is not good then I receive a low grade, not because I don't understand. (F-I)

Everything is too easy. . . . it's just the language is different, because we learn . . . maybe our syllabus in Hong Kong has covered some stuff which is taught in first year. (M-I)

Only one international student commented that university was more difficult than high school.

### ***POSITIVE EXPERIENCES AT UBC***

Focus group participants were asked to describe their positive experiences since arriving at UBC. Domestic students focussed on independence, choice of courses, and live in residence.

People act like they're just doing everything themselves was really an experience. Like, I love just taking the bus to Vancouver and walking around and finding things. . . . Everything you do is just how you want to do it, it's what you want to do, and I just love that. (F-D)

In high school you basically have to take certain courses other than one or two until the senior year, whereas here there's such a diverse selection of classes in the same subject. You can choose molecular biology or ecology . . . so many different things. So you're interested in what you're studying, and it's a lot easier not only to do well but just it's much better, and choose what you want to do, not just general courses. (F-D)

I think doing choices about courses is very important and very positive. I guess another thing . . . . I know it's a positive experience for me because I'll see all these students, I see how they cope with things, how they live, their experiences, you learn from them. (M-D)

Most of the comments revolved around living in residence. Residence was described as "a big family."

I think that residence has been an extremely positive part of university for me. . . . meet people that wouldn't be in any of your classes but you live with each other and you have to be nice, and you just get along so well, and you support each other, and it makes things a lot easier on yourself. (F-D)

I really think res does a lot to contribute to the university experience, and although I haven't really lived off campus, but from what I hear from my friends it's very different I am glad I live on campus and I'm getting so much more out of university. (F-D)

It's very nice, transition in first year easier, because there's a lot you don't have to worry about, you don't have to cook for yourself, you just take the little meal card and swipe it . . . . But then at the same time you still do have to live on your own and do a lot of work. It's kind of like half-way in between. I find it really nice. (F-D)

When asked to describe positive experiences, international students focussed on the pace of learning experiences and on self-development.

I'm learning a lot, like, really, really fast. Like, a lot of changes, and you have to be really, really quick in all the things you do. You have to be really well self-organized to achieve all the things you want throughout the year. (M-I)

And also it's good that there are people that you can talk to about what you really feel. Like, in high school people are all, like, dumb, you know? People don't talk about things. They only talk about party-wear or what TV show, but in university people talk about political stuff, what your beliefs are based on. And so then throughout four years you can develop more self-perception on what our points of view on things are, not just political but on certain systems of . . . on life, what is life, kind of philosophical things that you can talk to people about it and you can learn from other people also. (F-I)

## **ACADEMIC PROBLEMS**

Students were asked to describe their greatest academic problems. Clearly, domestic students perceived difficulties very differently than international students. For domestic students, midterms posed the greatest challenge. As one student exclaimed, *"I figure if it doesn't kill you it'll make you stronger."*

Yeah, as far as mid-terms, I was told that our first mid-term teacher in my math class was extremely hard. Prof didn't expect anybody to get over 40% in the course. . . . He told us that after he wrote it, obviously, and I was just thinking, "Why would you want that?" . . . My dad's a prof, and he told me that in university profs normally do that, they're trying to scare people out, because the courses are just too big. So I knew that, in the back of my mind, "Just stick with it, it is horrible." (F-D)

Related to the midterms were poor grades and the need to adjust to receiving lower grades.

You also have to stick through the first little bit. Like, I know from myself at the beginning of the year getting bad marks that weren't even that bad. I went to the university centre and I found out I'm am getting, like UBC B+ a average, to get Bs if you've had an A average. So you come here and you get, like, an average mark, and your, like, ego. (F-D)

You see your mark and you look in relation to the rest of the class, and maybe they're above that and it's not right. But once you get past that then I think I'm finding it a little bit easier now, even only after a few months, just understanding the style the certain profs have. But it is hard, right away, when you get to university, "Oh, I can't do this. The others are just so smart and I'm stupid." (F-D)

The greatest problem and considerable source of anxiety for international students was the LPI (Language Proficiency Index).

I have difficulties with LPI and with my essay writing, because I'm geography now and I have essays to write and I have no idea what an essay is. . . I understand those stuff, I have ideas about what I'm going to write, but I just cannot express it in the way I want. (F-I)

Apparently, this is my personal experience, English doesn't get . . . it's just effort doesn't make you get better. It also has to take time, just because it takes so much time with English. Maybe speaking a lot to a group, because speaking can improve if you speak with a lot of Canadians or English-speaking people, but writing-wise it takes a lot . . . it took me five years to get it in high school. (F-I)

There are a lot of people who fail LPI and they tried so many times, didn't pass it, they go to Douglas College, and then they give up. . . There are a lot of people that are like that. So it really tells that effort doesn't mean anything. (F-I)

Despite studying English in high school, living in an English speaking culture and taking the writing course for “people who fail the LPI,” for some students this examination remained an almost impossible hurdle. Of the 13 international participants in the focus group, seven had not yet passed the LPI. The purpose of the LPI eluded this group; they were unconvinced that it was a good test of one’s ability in English.

There are people I know whose English are pretty bad but they pass it because they just got to know how to do it . . . but there are people who are native speakers and they don’t even pass the LPI. . . . So I don’t understand why UBC makes such a big deal of the LPI. (F-I)

I don’t understand why they have . . . they require us to do LPI because we before we applied we have to do TOEFL or IOS, which is international standard English test. (F-I)

As the international student group stated earlier, one of their key educational objectives was to learn English. However, the minimal instruction offered in a few classes was considered “useless.”

And the most important is there’s no organization [that] can help us with the LPI. There are only eight classes, and then it’s not enough, it’s not helpful. They’re not helping much at all. (F-I)

These students pointed out that other universities did not have such a requirement, and that at the colleges, a grade of 4 (rather than 5 required by UBC) was considered a pass. The level of English required to pass the LPI for new English speakers was described as highly unrealistic.

Apparently they assume you know everything in the English book, or they assume you know that you’re perfect at grammar, you’re perfect in content, and they basically just tell you to write these essays. (M-I)

I wanted to say something more about LPI because it’s a big focus on your grammar. If you produce a really, really stupid essay, but grammar-free essay you’ll get highs. (F-I)

Even punctuation, they count that. (F-I)

I noticed that I realize that if LPI’s about grammar, and arguably university standard, when you’re writing an essay, if there’s a grammar mistake you’re not up to a university level yet, you’re still in high school. In university writing they don’t care about grammar because they assume that you should know . . . by Grade 12 you have no grammar problems anymore, and it’s more about content and your style rather than your grammatical mistakes. That’s like high school and middle school stuff. (F-I)

The LPI could not have been any less popular with these international students. These students were able to express their opinions about the LPI clearly and articulately – in English.

### ***BEST ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES***

Students were asked to describe their best academic experience at UBC to date. Domestic students highlighted enjoyable classes with good TAs, interactive classes, and professors who enjoyed teaching as their best academic experiences.



I have a European class that I'm taking . . . and I'm just loving that class. I found the TA so good. . . . Compared to chem class when my TA scares the living daylights out of me. And your TA is supposed to be the person that you go to talk to, right, and I can't talk to the TA in my chem class. In my European class, so good! Like, he's so . . . awesome. I love going to that class. (F-D)

Students contrasted the joys of interactive classes with the drudgery of non-interactive classes.

I find a lot of teachers are telling, "It's going to be very interactive." Like, "I really want you guys to talk to during lecture." Like, my bio prof, I love going to that class, and he's such a good lecturer. Even he cracks jokes, he makes me really understand. Biology can be very "This is cell...", and he totally relates it to, "This is your dad, this is your mum, and here you are," and I just really like him. (F-D)

You know how we have all of our notes printed out, well, [the professor] reads the exact same thing, so there's really no point in going to class if that's all he does. I find the prof should really elaborate more, try to connect a bit more. (F-D)

Students truly appreciated professors who enjoy teaching. They asserted that "*having good profs are so important*" and that "*it's nice to know that your prof is actually a person instead of somebody who's giving you instructions.*"

I was thinking about my psychology prof . He's the kind of guy who really likes to teach . . . . [He] talks about his personal life. He makes it so one-on-one with us, and he swears in class, he cracks jokes. . . . Like, he'll tell you to stand up and talk about yourself, you know? And I guess that makes it so much more important. Like, I told him . . . . "I feel so comfortable in coming up to you and telling you what I did on the week-end." I wouldn't tell any other prof, I'm sure they wouldn't care. (M-D)

My English prof, she's so nice. She goes totally out of her way to help our class. The first week she had us all write an in-class essay and then she marked it and gave us each appointments at her office to go over . . . because obviously we're all very different levels. She totally went over it and told us exactly what we need to work on so that the next week when we actually had to write one for marks we all knew exactly what to expect and what needed to work on. So I really appreciated that, because she just seems like she'd do anything to help you learn and it is easier. (F-D)

When they try harder . . . [it] makes you interested, because they make you so much to go to class. You know, we've been to parties, it's been a long night, "Oh, I should go to class, or should I stay home?" But if you enjoy the class it gives you more of a push to go. (F-D)

I have a class and every section is taught by a different prof, and it's really cool to see how when you do like one prof I go to class more. (F-D)

International students were somewhat more reticent in describing their best academic experience. A few identified specific courses – "*English!*" "*my math*" and one student mentioned the importance of professors. The main focus of the discussion was on being pushed to think critically. International students agreed that this challenge was "*very good*" and "*very important.*"

It's hard, but . . . it's hard because we're not used to it. In high school you don't have to, you just memorize, but in university you actually analyze and critically think. And it's hard because we're not used to it, but it develops your intellectual . . . [ability]. (F-I)

## SUMMARY OF THE FIRST FOCUS GROUPS

The twenty-two participants in the first focus group sessions had been attending UBC for approximately two months. Overall, these students described their experiences to be quite positive. Initial adjustments to the routine of the university, residence life, the classroom milieu were quickly mastered. Both domestic and international focus group participants made friends, learned the rhythms of the university classroom setting, and were beginning to balance the demands and temptations of their social lives with the motivation, focus, and discipline required to succeed at their studies.

For some international students, initial contact with UBC was far from optimal. They encountered difficulties in trying to learn about the university and its related programs. Some students reported difficulties negotiating various web sites. Others claimed that the information was available if one was willing to take the time and effort to find it, for after all, doing so was part of the “game” of surviving university.

Domestic students expressed considerable resiliency to their initial university experiences. They had been primed with stories of how hard first year would be. Most were pleasantly surprised that their first two months were not as challenging as they had expected. Many international focus group participants considered first year to be a repeat of their upper secondary studies. Their greatest challenge was not the subject matter of their first year courses; rather, it was mastery of English.

Domestic students considered living in residence to be one of the best aspects of university attendance. Students were exposed to new freedoms, a venue for making fast friends, including international students who were considered unique and fascinating.

International students living in residence also reported similar experiences. However, their limited knowledge of Canadian culture and traditions was somewhat restricting. Some students sought the company of Canadian students while others were more inclined to socialize with friends with backgrounds similar to theirs. Programs at International House received mixed reviews. Some students appreciated exposure to Canadians through the Peer Program; others felt that International House and its programs were more Asian than international.

Commuter students, both international and domestic, felt disconnected from the university. Long commutes limited the time they spent on campus. They reported that they experienced little contact with their classmates during class.

Complaints not unfamiliar by university students over time were also voiced by this group. Food was central among the complaints. The extent to which it resembled food from students' cultures, its quality and availability (e.g., meal hours in residence) of food were considered problematic, especially by international students. For some, their overall health had improved. For others, it had deteriorated. Confusion over health care coverage was shared among all of the international students.

Domestic students considered the cost of attending university – including tuition, fees, and living costs – to be reasonable. International students did not share this view. At \$80 per lecture, according to one international student's calculation, tuition fees were considered to be too high. Extra fees were not appreciated either. International students felt that they should be able to determine which extra costs they should pay. Both international and domestic students criticized the lack of availability of scholarships at UBC. For international students, the few that were available would not cover the costs of textbooks. They questioned whether studying abroad at the undergraduate level was the best strategy. If it was, then they questioned whether UBC was the best institution to do so. However, the culture of the university was very much appreciated by both

groups. They felt that their exposure to such a wide range of cultures would have a life long effect on them.

When asked to identify their greatest academic problem, domestic students said “midterms.” For international students, the LPI was the bane of their existence. Earning a “5” on this vile test was deemed to be almost impossible. According to domestic students, the best academic experiences involved interactive classes, good TAs and good professors. In response to this question, international students identified specific courses and the need to think critically.

## **THE SECOND FOCUS GROUP SESSIONS**

### ***PARTICIPANTS IN THE SECOND FOCUS GROUPS***

All of those who participated in the autumn 2003 focus groups were invited to attend the second focus group sessions in February 2004. New participants who had responded to the invitation to participate in the first focus groups after they were held were also invited to participate in the second focus groups. Two focus group sessions – one for international students and one for domestic students – were held separately.

In total, 14 international students (six males and eight females) and seven domestic students (one male and six females) participated in the second focus group sessions. Three male and four female international students three female domestic students had also participated in the autumn 2003 sessions. Similar to the first focus group sessions, each student was paid \$15.00 for her or his participation. Pizza and beverages were served during the sessions. Each focus group lasted approximately two hours.

At the beginning of each session, a short questionnaire was administered to obtain demographic characteristics from the participants in our focus group sessions. This information is summarized in Tables 3 and 4.

The results of the demographic survey reveal that the majority of students come from homes where one or more parent had obtained a university education. Although this sample was not random, this finding concur with that of the CBIE (2004) According to the results of the 2004 CBIE international student survey, the proportion of international students with university educated fathers has increased from about 25% in 1988 to 60% in 2004. Comparable figures for international students’ mothers are 13% and 43%, respectively.

## **FINDINGS OF THE SECOND FOCUS GROUPS**

### ***MOST AND LEAST ENJOYABLE EXPERIENCES***

By February 2004, these first year focus group participants had been studying at UBC for seven months. Participants were asked to share their most enjoyable experience to date and to describe why this experience was enjoyable.

For one domestic student, it was the extracurricular activities associated with her small faculty:

**Table 3. Demographic Characteristics of Domestic Students (second focus group, Feb. 2004)**

<b>Sex</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Faculty</b>	<b>Country of origin</b>	<b>First Language</b>	<b>Educational background of parents</b>	<b>Sources of Financing</b>	<b>Province, city or town of origin</b>
Male	19	Science	Jordan	Arabic	Mother: Secondary Father: Bachelor Degree	Non-repayable loan from government	Burnaby, British Columbia
Female	19	Music	Canada	English	Mother: Graduate Degree Father: Graduate Degree	Direct Support from parents; Part-time work during the academic year Personal savings; Summer jobs	London, Ontario
Female	20	Arts	Canada	English	Mother: Community College Diploma Father: Bachelor Degree	Direct support from parents; Part-time during the academic year; Summer jobs	Guelph, Ontario
Female	20	Agricultural Sciences	Canada	English	Mother: Bachelor degree Father: Community College Diploma	Direct support from parents; Repayable loan from family; Scholarships Part-time during the academic year; Personal savings; Summer jobs	Toronto, Ontario
Female	23	Nursing	Korea	Korean	Mother: Bachelor Degree Father: Bachelor Degree	Direct support from parents; Loans from government student assistance programs	Burnaby, British Columbia
Female	19	Commerce	Philippines	English	Mother: Bachelor Degree Father: Graduate Degree	Direct support from parents; Loans from government; Scholarships Personal savings; Summer jobs	Small town, Saskatchewan
Female	19	Arts	Canada	Cantonese	Mother: Secondary Diploma Father: Community College Diploma	Direct support from parents	Richmond, British Columbia

**Table 4. Demographic Characteristics of International Students (second focus group, Feb. 2004)**

Sex	Age	Faculty	Country of origin	First language	Educational background of parents	Sources of financing	Length of living in Canada	Living in a different country prior coming to Canada
Female	20	Science	Singapore	English	Mother: Bachelor Degree Father: Community College Diploma	Direct support from parents Scholarships	8 months	No
Female	20	Arts	United States	English	Mother: Graduate Degree Father: Graduate Degree	Direct support from parents Scholarships Personal savings	8 months	No
Female	20	Arts	Thailand	Thai	Mother: Graduate Degree Father: Graduate Degree	Direct support from parents	7 months	USA – 3 years
Female	19	Arts	South Korea	Korean	Mother: Bachelor Degree Father: Graduate Degree	Direct support from parents	5 years and 11 months	No
Female	20	Science	Indonesia	Bahasa Indonesia	Mother: Bachelor Degree Father: Graduate Degree	Direct support from parents Scholarships	7 months	Singapore – 8 years
Female	19	Arts	Thailand	Khmer (Cambodian)	Mother: Graduate Degree Father: Bachelor Degree	Direct support from parents	7 months	No
Female	21	Engineering	China	Chinese	Mother: Bachelor Degree Father: Graduate Degree	Direct support from parents	6 months	Singapore – 4 years
Female	20	Arts	Hong Kong	Cantonese	Mother: Apprenticeship Father: Apprenticeship	Scholarships	6 months	UK – 1 year
Male	20	Commerce	Hong Kong	Cantonese	Mother: Elementary Father: Elementary	Direct support from parents	7 months	No

**Table 4 (continued)**

<b>Sex</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Faculty</b>	<b>Country of origin</b>	<b>First language</b>	<b>Educational background of parents</b>	<b>Sources of financing</b>	<b>Length of living in Canada</b>	<b>Living in a different country prior coming to Canada</b>
Male	20	Applied Sciences	Hong Kong	Cantonese	Mother: Community College Diploma Father: Bachelor Degree	Direct support from parents Scholarships	8 months	No
Male	22	Computer Science	China	Mandarin	Mother: Community College Father: Bachelor Degree	Direct support from parents Scholarships	8 months	Singapore – 5 years
Male	20	Commerce	China	Chinese	Mother: Secondary Father: Secondary	Direct support from parents Scholarships Part-time work during the academic year	8 months	No
Male	21	Engineering	Malaysia	Chinese	Mother: Secondary Father: Community College Diploma	Direct support from parents Scholarships	6 months	Singapore – 4 years
Male	20	Commerce	Malaysia	English/ Chinese	Mother: Graduate Degree Father: Graduate Degree	Direct support from parents	7 months	No

In [my faculty], since we are such a small Faculty, there are a lot of things and I enjoyed the football team. It's the Charity event for Children's Hospital. It's a good opportunity to help the community and also have fun. It's a good experience for me because I got to meet a lot of [faculty] students from all kind of years, from first year, second year, and third year. (F-D)

Several other domestic students highlighted living in Vancouver, in university residence and the related exposure to people from different cultures.

I think my favourite time is living in residence. Being around people all the time, I really like that feeling. (F-D)

I found that being in Vancouver and being [faculty] major, all the opportunities to go here to concerts, from all different places, concerts on campus and off campus, like the opportunities are amazing. I have had some of my best experiences going there. (F-D)

Residence is definitely really entertaining for me and I am really enjoying being around so many different people. In the past I always was around the same group, but over here, is very diverse and really enjoy that. As well as being in a new place like from Toronto coming to Vancouver, it is really nice. (F-D)

For me is like being in a bigger city and actually seeing the whole nature because for me being from Saskatchewan, it was just flat and fields everywhere, it's like farming community even in the city sounds that's like the best for me. (F-D)

International students reported similar positive experiences:

It was an international orientation when I first came here. It was awesome I got to meet people from all over the world. (F-I)

I think that I enjoy was that I am learning more, in depth than I learned in high school. (F-I)

I enjoy freedom at UBC. The environment of UBC is not strict so much. It's promoting independence. (M-I)

The most enjoyable part of UBC is. I would say....I cherish friendship here and the friends, environment of people here in Canada as well. The environment as a whole is great. (F-I)

I enjoy any friends in this room, I joined Ski Club. I like skiing. It is really nice. (F-I)

I enjoy the club I joined in [Student Society Club]. There are so many clubs on campus. And I joined one that suits me well. (M-I)

In the research literature on university retention and attrition, classroom experiences are often considered the most important experiences for first year undergraduate students, not only as places for their academic learning, but also for socializing with other students. Interestingly, none of the domestic students and only one international student mentioned their classroom experiences or learning as their most enjoyable experiences.

Students were then asked to describe one particularly difficult experience. Trying to find quiet time in residence, the quality of cafeteria food, struggling with independence and access to resources were identified by domestic students.

For me studying in res, I am finding very hard to do. I like to walk around and talk to everybody and just getting a quiet time, it's a challenge. . . . Actually I am finding quite difficult to be and feel really healthy living in residence. The food in caff is not normally that I would eat at home. It's always so many people around you that you want always socializing instead of doing things what you should be doing. I really feel out of balance. (F-D)

The most difficult thing for me was adjusting from high school to university. . . . you have to learn how to study on your own instead of someone is telling you what to do. (F-D)

I think it's finding a computer to study during an exam time, especially final exams. (M-D)

Two commuter students identified the long commute to UBC as the most difficult experience.

I live in Metrotown and commute just kills me. (F-D)

I live in Richmond, we don't have good transportation. . . . In busy time is easily one and half hour to get to UBC and when I go home, it takes the same time. (F-D)

International students, in contrast, had the most difficulty adjusting a different country. In particular, they highlighted university standards and differences in Canadian culture.

I found that here UBC has different standards in general, like skills are different than like from high school. In university we have to study harder and first year can be difficult. (F-I)

Many people on my floor are Canadians. I found pretty hard to connect with them first few months. People talking about Canada and stuff, about Canucks and thing like that. And it is difficult. It's hard just adapting to Canada and just to adapting to a university life. Everyone knows everything and how to get here or know how to get there around the campus. It's hard to make strong connection outside a class or within a class. (F-I)

Like domestic students, international students struggled with the need to be independent.

I guess the flip side of having a lot of independence can lie behind academics, especially when your professor and TA are not supportive, you can really find a pain just going to classroom and not enjoying it. It can really be difficult. (M-I)

These results concur with those of Perucci and Hu (1995) who found that differences in language, customs, and academic and social environments could lead to problems at the early stages of students' university careers. According to Perucci and Hu, language skills, self-esteem, and feelings of positive involvement with their social environment were determining factors of satisfaction among international students.



## ***ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE***

Next, students were asked to discuss their academic performance. In particular, they were asked to describe their reaction to their Christmas examination results.

Domestic students were very blunt. Several students used the phrase “*I got what they deserved.*”

I felt that I got everything I deserved. What I put into my grades, I got back. In some courses I had to work really hard to pass, but I did pass and get what I expected to get. And I just want to say that I love scaling, when the whole class gets bad, it gets moved up, that’s great. (F-D)

I think I got pretty well, I got what I deserve. I came to university with the whole new standard of thinking about grades, I was not expecting to get As, I tried harder, but I am happy how I did. I think what I did was average. And I found out in high school as well going to exams thinking I was going to fail and actually I did well. (F-D)

For me, I definitely got what I deserved. I didn’t do well very much at all, first term. . . . My marks were definitely below average, but I know why, I didn’t study. I was kind of caught up, I was not partying, and I can’t blame that too much. I was just chilling a little bit too much. (F-D)

My marks are more like an average mark, couple courses and I had difficulty with, but so many courses I did really well, my average out to be right in the middle. Overall, I was not expecting too much either. (F-D)

When I got my marks I was surprised and shocked, I expected high Bs and low As, and I got low Bs and Cs. In high school I was getting high As, high marks and I was expecting higher marks. (M-D)

As they indicated in the autumn focus group session, these students had arrived with lowered expectations regarding achieving high grades. Such attitudes helped to mitigate disappointment associated with lower grades.

Just from everyone has said, “We don’t do well at university.” I also came here with the expectation that I really wanted to know Vancouver and meet people. And the first year was not the most important to me. . . . As long as I pass and feel good about it what I have done this year. I was not trying to get straight As. (F-D)

You feel stressed, you can miss it a little bit, but you get used to it. You have to think to yourself, it is really hard, you know, so lowering your expectation actually makes you feel better. When you do actually get a good mark, it’s different. (F-D)

However, the domestic group did not appear bitter about their underachievement. Rather, such grades were described as a wake up call to do better. Also, when they did eventually earn higher grades, they would be much more appreciated.

I think I did poorly on my Christmas exam. I didn’t study very well, I had a cold and I was adjusting to the university life. I was preparing for exams as I was preparing in high school, like I study in a short term and really hard overnight and that didn’t work. So I decided to study harder this term, but I think I did it really bad on my exams. (F-D)

I think if I am getting a high mark now, it so much rewarding than in high school, you feel that your work was judged more accurately and you really deserve that mark. So it's much more rewarding. (F-D)

The international focus group also reported that their grades after first term were lower than their previous achievement in high school. Unlike the domestic students, however, international students attributed their decline of grades to adjusting to university and UBC.

In high school everyone received better marks and after come here, especially when we have classes with those senior students we are usually the lowest because we are here first year. And we didn't get used to educating, they are informed better. But I think it's still okay because we are first year. (F-I)

For me, just because the school is so big, I am adjusting, I am little overwhelmed. So, to approach the TA during the lecture right away, I have to gain confidence to get to know things little more, then I could go and ask them. (F-I)

I think my high school grades – I received a lot better marks than here. It was a huge thing I cannot understand how I didn't received better marks. I was kind of, actually disappointed; I got lower than in high school. (F-I)

One student was pleased with her grades, but identified room for improvement.

My marks are higher that I expected. After I got my marks I was very happy with my marks, but still I think I can improve, but the most important is English. If I can improve my English, the mark will be different. English is the only problem for me. But I am happy with my marks. (M-I)

International students pointed out that TAs were central to their academic wellbeing. However, for some students, approaching TAs was difficult.

Also it is hard to know in English and History some of marks are highly subjective, it's hard to know how TA is marking. Still you have to get time to understand TA. You have to know your TA whoever is marking, how to get a good grade. (F-I)

I think for international students, asking questions to the TA is intimidating. . . . It could be a probably because they don't understand what we are asking, something like that. It could be a problem. (F-I)

Focus group participants were asked to describe what was going well – and not so well – in their current (second) term. Several domestic students commented on difficulties finding information about course selection, the lack of human contact and concurrent over-emphasis on web-based information.

I was not properly informed. I was calling UBC; I rather talk to somebody and figure out things out. (F-D)

I found coming here first year it's so hard finding the information from UBC about what you need for your courses. It's was just impossible to find the right information, I was so disoriented, I had a headache if I did everything right. (F-D)

By the end of the summer I was very good in manoeuvring all the way around about the UBC website, but I was very nervous for setting up my classes not having spoken to anyone, in person or on the phone. I was just going by and this guy says, "You should take this and this," but I still kind of wondering I wanted to make sure to get some assurance, even on the phone to say, "These are courses what you should take, this is right." "Is it anything I should do for that?" (F-D)

The unavailability of some courses due to high demand was also addressed as an ongoing concern.

Just talking about class sizes, Math has been so packed, we have probably 100 students and there are not enough seats. (M-D)

Actually I had a hard time finding seats in some courses, because there were a lot of people to get into one course and there were way too less seats for people and professors usually don't find seats unless they think there have fewer seats. So I had to wait till next September to get to one of my Japanese courses. (F-D)

Given the increased costs of tuition, the lack of desired courses as particularly unpalatable.

I think it's quite unfair sometimes because the tuition fee is going up and I think sometimes that I am not getting things that I want to and I have to take other courses to substitute that. It's really hard. (F-D)

My parents, they pay my tuition fee and they don't want me to take extra courses just to fill my slots. I am finding I know my Physics, it's the second year course for me. . . . I'm a full time student. I am trying to . . . find courses that I can plug in. It's really hard because so many things have pre-requisites if I don't have, I can't go. So I am stuck there. What am I going to do now? I can't take for example five courses, but I can't get in courses I like because they are full. (F-D)

However, all in all, domestic students seemed more content with the second term of their first year.

It is much better than the first term, at least this time I am more organized, from this time I am doing Physics, for this Math. And the way I take my notes now is very different than I was doing before. So I just got more used to how it works for me, like do my homework. (F-D)

First semester I had five courses, this term I have four, but still I have as much and more reading this semester. I have four books each, there are like big textbooks. Now because of my grades from last semester, it's like get down and studying and how my classes are scheduled this semester, is a lot better. Everything is going really well this term. (F-D)

For this term I adjusted to university life. For assignments I prepared before two weeks and my assignments I finished them before the deadline. If I need help, I go to my TA or my professor and that's what helps. For exams I prepared a week or two, I don't leave it for the last day. (M-D)

Like domestic students, the international students felt that second term was going well.

I think it's much easier, it's better than last term because I know what TA wants in my assignments, so it's better. And I love it. (F-I)

I think first term usually covers general knowledge, the second term goes more in details, it is more interesting, versus first one. Right now it is way more interesting, for example, Psychology course first term was basic and this term is more specific. (F-I)

I think first term courses were boring, second term I find it much more interesting. (F-I)

Many international students commented that first year was too repetitive of high school or of other university courses and they wanted more challenges.

I think first year courses are much, much more similar to high school. (F-I)

I was frustrated with some lecturers, who really look at us like high school students, “You guys don't know anything and I will teach you everything. And I am going to change your mind and open your mind to the world.” Sure they are some people, they need their minds to open, but I didn't like that they undermine so much. (F-I)

I am in first year engineering and some of the math courses, some of the chapters are overlapping. And it is wasting of money by studying the same chapter in two courses. They are overlapping. (F-I)

## ***ACADEMIC INTEGRATION***

According to Tinto (1993), the more students are engaged with university life, the more they will learn. Student engagement is centered in and around the classroom, and classrooms can be defined “as smaller communities of learning comprised of faculty and students” (p.132). Student contact with faculty members is central to engagement. Tinto claims that classrooms are the academic and social gateways to greater involvement in the broader academic and social university community. In the next section, focus group participants describe their classroom experiences.

### ***Classroom Experiences***

Focus group participants were asked to describe the enjoyable aspects of their classroom experiences. Clearly, for both domestic and international students, professors and teaching assistants made or broke the classroom experience. Domestic students made the following comments:

Just having a good prof makes all the difference. This term my [subject area] prof is probably the first that I have had for years. He has been like “Wow. You are so genius, you are so smart.” He is really amazing. (F-D)

[In] my [subject area] class . . . we had a different professor first term and the second term. And I found that it makes all the difference in self motivation . . . My first term professor in [subject area] class was amazing. You can tell, he tried to make things funny and interesting and he threw a little detail that it just made it really neat just to listen to him to speak. And my second term professor doesn't really promote coming to class because he just talks everything that is in a textbook. So you can do your reading and get an extra two hour of sleep a day if you didn't go. He doesn't have very high expectations because all the questions on the exam are taken right from the study guides. So you really don't have to do reading, just to memorize the study guides. So it doesn't really make me want to learn the material, it really should because it's part of my major. It's very intrinsic what I am doing. It's not encouraging and it doesn't make a very exciting class. (F-D)

I had profs in [subject area] courses and I met really good professor and he prepares a lot for a course and we have to read a lot of stuff like articles and newspapers. I think a really good professor is part of enjoyable experience. (F-D)

This term my English prof, I found him very good, the way he teaches English is just, I know English depends on the prof, how you mark it. He just teaches very well and my Physics prof does really good job. He does demonstrations, sometimes movies, he does a lot for the course, but my Math teacher, and I found him completely unprepared. I go to class just to know where they are within the textbook and I teach myself. Because he does it on the spot and he makes tons errors on the board and like kids in the class telling him where the errors are. I just don't think that is a good way for me to learn because it forces me going back and forward and back and correcting himself, and I can't learn that way. For Math at least, if he would practice a little more for himself, he would have to crack himself in front of everybody in class. (F-D)

Like the domestic students, international students singled out professors from particular courses:

I like all [subject area] professor, they are very hard professors. I really like them I do really enjoy staying in their classes. (M-I)

However, the subjective nature of some courses troubled some international students.

I think most of my classroom experiences are positive. But what I found really annoying the fact that certain subjects are so subjective. Like, for example, English 112, some professors are so different. I took two similar English courses last semester. I did pretty all right, but if I took it with different professor, it would be completely a different story. He would not look how my English was, he would not hang up with little details how you write it and other little things. I think they should standardize it. (M-I)

Both international and domestic students praised friendly, helpful and knowledgeable TAs.

Regarding the interaction with TA, TAs are really friendly here and it helps. TAs are not friends, but you can follow them talk to them. And also professor are friendly too. When I go and ask questions. They answer my way. The classroom interaction is different than interaction in lecture, the lectures are really big. Even like fifty people or less in classes we can comfort and interact with people, but in lecture is difficult to do that. (F-I)

I enjoy the TA. They try to remember your name and then every time you go to tutorial, they try to remember your name and I am really glad when they give you your exam paper, they don't have to announce your name, and they don't have to ask to pick it up. They hand it to you and they remember and know spelling. Chinese spelling is very hard for Westerner, I know. But they remember, I am really glad. (F-I)

I usually really enjoy our TAs. I know in my English lecture we have discussions once a week with a TA and she actually told us, "Don't judge English based on [this] prof because it is not really good". We actually had a lecture and she was just amazing they a little bit younger and they seem to be little more in tune. (F-D)

Grey (2002) points out that international students feel vulnerable and disadvantaged as they struggle to be heard at a social, academic and institutional level, and that their perceptions of exclusion by academic faculty in lectures, tutorials and out of class meetings results in feelings of distress. Grey's study demonstrates the importance of creating positive learning experiences for international students through a collaborative dialogue so that students and staff can develop personal and intercultural relationships. Our findings concur with those of Grey.

### *Class Size*

For some students, large class sizes were neither effective nor enjoyable.

In think in Sciences, the class size is very big. For example, Chemistry class, there are 250 people, the biggest class and we don't have a chance to ask questions. Sometimes I feel it's too hard. (M-D)

Classroom discussion is pretty much not existing in my department. And I miss that. Especially like in English, where in high school we had lively discussions. . . . I really love English, but this semester, the prof used a microphone and I even didn't understand anything at times. The acoustic is really bad and it's such a big class [400] that you don't get anything out of that. (F-D)

Not all students disliked large class sizes. The nature of the course and the attitude of the professor were important factors in class effectiveness.

I have had like smaller classes like English with only 20 something people, and I had 200 people in lectures . . . . I think the variety is good, for some courses, it is better of to have a large class and some it is better of to have smaller classes. For me I rather enjoy the smaller one because you are able to ask more questions, more talk and just discuss and don't feel intimidated to ask in front of everybody. Other than that, it really depends on a course. (F-D)

This student compared the quality of classroom experiences in two courses with similar enrolments of around 100.

Psychology and English are very different in a way that professors take it. My professor in Psychology is almost like a wall. . . . There is really no discussion group, we wouldn't talk about it unless I didn't have two other people who are taking the same course with the same prof on my floor. And it is very interesting material and he is a very good professor [but] he says, "this is your TA please direct your question to this person." So he really didn't ever open up for the questions versus my English XXX is amazing. . . . it's a lot of work, but it's very interesting and professor, he just does it off the top of his head and discussions go to different places. And there are two lectures and a discussion each week, but even in a lecture we encouraged to discuss things and ask questions. (F-D)

Students were clear that it was not the class size that determined its quality – it was the professor.

I took Math course last semester and we had around 250 students in the lecture. Most people who had questions during the lecture put their hands up; the professor ignored them most of the time. I think he was leaving that to the TA to answer it. So a lot of students, my friend had complaints about that. (F-D)

It's frustrating; I know in my class of 200 people, the prof just reads from the textbook. I know 10 people in a class and we know that it was absolutely no way going to class. You don't learn anything and just read before your test. And you should be paying your tuition for your class time and going to class you do learn more than not going, but no point of going is just the pain. It's just the test at the end of the year. (F-D)

For international students for whom English was not a first language, limited or no discussion, regardless of class size, was deemed to diminish the classroom experience.

I find kind of lack of discussions. This is really annoying because I was used to that's what I learned a lot. I got to be involved more than being in too boring lectures. . . . maybe too big classes. When you have a good lecture and kind of a big class. . . . there is no problem there. But when you are in a small seminar and people either haven't done enough of the work to be able to speak up on the topic or the teacher doesn't get enough time, or doesn't allow people to speak up, and people tend not to pay attention what professor is saying. We can't have a discussion. (F-I)

International students acknowledged that discussions could be difficult in large classes.

It would be more difficult. . . . I want to say that [discussions are] quite rare, when it happened, then it's nice. (F-I)

Domestic students were particularly pleased when professors and TAs took the time to learn their names.

I found that in [specific] Faculty the most fascinating is that we knew each other after two weeks. There are so few of us. In my Theory class if I have a question one or two times. He would say, "Here you go Anne" and he uses your name. You feel like that you really can approach them that they know your name. In Psychology class, I don't know if the professor would notice if I was not in class. I know that in my classes, because they are smaller, they know your name and I am inclined to go the classes with an exemption of history. (F-D)

In Commerce we have to get a photo ID and our prof in first semester printed them out and throughout whole school year he knew your name, he would not call on you, he would follow you and just be like, "You talk." He will say your name. The same with my second semester prof, at the beginning of the year, first class, he got everybody's name and by the second or third class he already knew and if he didn't he would come up to you, shake your hand and stared at you and be like "What's your name?" And after that he would know you. It is a lot of easier to talk to him after that. (F-D)

Getting to know your TA, I find it is really very good; to ask questions than email them. They know that you are engaged and interested and then they learn your name by contacting them. And my TA in English class was really awesome. Easy to talk to. (F-D)

Despite the vastness of UBC compounded by many large classes, students appreciated the efforts by professors to personalize the teaching and learning experience.

### *Contact with Faculty*

In his conceptual model of the dropout process, Pascarella (1980) emphasized the importance of informal contact between students and faculty members. Along with other researchers (Astin, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1978; Spady, 1971) Pascarella maintains that different types of informal contact may influence students' intellectual, career and personal development. As such, it is one of the important components of social and academic integration. Pascarella and Terenzini (1978) and Pascarella (1980) report that the frequency and quality of student-faculty interactions may be important factors in student retention. However, the frequency and nature of contacts may have a differential impact on persistence for different types of students.

There was little difference in the experiences of international and domestic students in contacting faculty. Some students reported very positive experiences.

I have had just really good experience last semester with my Commerce prof. Even in classrooms we had very good discussions, and through contact, we can get a hold of him anywhere, you would go to his office during his office hours and he would chat about anything, whatever you want it. And if we have problems and questions about class, you can just email that and he would write right away back. He even sends little luck notes every single time. We just gained confidence that he actually cared about us what we are going to do. And like my English prof, she used to teach an English course through WebCT, is really easy to get hold of her through email and she always check that out through her distance course. So that is pretty good. (F-D)

When we talk about profs, they are quite accessible. I have been to several office hours, they were very nice, and they seem really friendly. Yah. Staff member, they are all different and just 'Yah, ask me the question?' (F-I)

I like the TA in our lab in my course [subject area]. And in that course we have to use some maps, we use software and software is professionally taught and the TA and the supervisor are always looking around in class to help students who have problems. We can question any time. So, they are very helpful. (F-I)

Actually I went to my English professor's office hours many, many times; she was very kind professor, although she is hard. She asks to come to her office hours if you have some written work or letter, so I did come with some summaries or something like that. She always corrected very kindly. I think she is very good professor, but her marking is hard . . . her office hours are after lecture, so I went to her office, follow her and ask her some questions. (M-I)

In our [subject area] course we don't have a discussion with our professor. His office hours are after the lecture, so we can always go after lecture and professor helpfully answers the questions after. (M-I)

However, when an encounter was perceived as negative, students were very reluctant to make a second attempt at contacting a faculty member.



I have had one situation, one of my profs, even though people don't talk to her, me and another . . . student went up to her office and she said, "Yes, you can come to my office any time and you are welcome." And we went and we just want to see our test and she said, "No. You have to make an appointment." But she never clarified that, so we just never went again. We just, maybe we made a mistake, but she is rude too. She kind of scared us; she is not very approachable as she said she was. We will never go again. . . . And also in the lectures, when someone approached her with a question she would say, "I already said that." She was not welcoming, she just was really intimidating us. That's why we never asked her again. (F-D)

It's very difficult. . . . I approached one English prof, he was pretty okay in class, but he was kind of mean to me when I came and asked him a question. Seriously, he was mean I showed him my journal and he said, "You obviously have a great problem with the summary." He was putting me down the whole way, "You cannot do such things" but I thought you said that, something you can state our opinion. I just did nice way, I said it very nicely, and he was like, "Are you kind of saying that I taught you the wrong thing?" You know what I mean? No, I am just asking, I am just clarifying something what you said. It doesn't mean that the opposite is bad. I was really pissed off, seriously pissed off. . . . [Since then] I just emailed him if I have any question. (F-I)

#### Others reported limited contact with professors.

I haven't had that much experience in contacting professors. TAs are often really good, usually very welcoming. They are wonderful people. (F-D)

Sometimes I feel that even during their office hours, once I went there and first time I went there, he was there, but next time I went there, he had to leave in two minutes or something. They are pretty busy. It's not their fault, but the fact you will not be able to meet one on one, face-to face. Sometimes you have to meet through emails. (M-I)

#### Students reported contacting faculty face-to-face, by email, or by telephone. As one student recounted, all methods of contact were useful.

I like to meet them, I emailed them and I get a response almost immediately, so it is really good. I have to make an appointment; I have to go there because my question and stuff is very complicated and I would rather just go in and be able to talk it than email them back and forth. (F-D)

Focus group participants were asked to indicate, on a scale of one to ten, how comfortable they felt in contacting faculty members. Domestic students' responses ranged from seven to 10 with more located at the higher end of the scale.

I think I feel really confident in contacting faculty members. If I have a question, I feel 10 in contacting with them. (F-D)

I think for me, 7 or 8 because I am a shy person. (M-D)

Like 10, it is easier and then if I have to approach them personally, I am less into it because of my past experience with the profs. I usually ask my friend to go with me, I am little bit scared, so I am a little bit uncomfortable to talk in person. Other than that, I am not definitely scared to email them at all. (F-D)

International students' responses ranged from six to nine and were distributed quite evenly.

I find that some of my teachers are more personal than the others. Email helps when they are pretty intimidating, it's easier contacting them on line. (F-I)

They are pretty quick in replying an email. (F-I)

[It] depend[s] on [the] professor. (M-I)

Using the same scale, participants were asked to rate the extent to which they felt welcome in contacting faculty members. Most domestic students rated the extent to which they felt welcome as nine, for both professors and TAs.

Through email with some of my profs, it's really good, but getting one on one time with couple of them, because they teach three or four sections, it's hard. With one prof, I just talk to him right after the class, but he is also rushing to the next class too, so I just have that time after the class and before his class, just 10 minutes there is really good. If I can't get hold of him, it's very easy to get hold of him through email. (F-D)

My English TA is really great; she is helping me edit my stories and contacting me with school. Which is really great. In high school I couldn't ask teachers to do that. And I would never ask the prof to do that. I know they don't have time and they don't really care. But a TA is good for that, more personal. . . . I would say 9 in contacting TA. I really only contacted one professor, I would say 9 as well. He was really great. (F-D)

I would say 9 for TAs. Once I went, it was not my TA's office hours, but I went there to contact the other TA. When I went to my TA's office hours, she was really helpful, she helped me a lot with my midterm. (F-D)

International students' ratings ranged from five to 10.

Some professors, they have policy of not addressing likes specific problems through email. They want to go to see them, so they only answer very simple questions, "Please come when you cannot read it or come to see me tomorrow either." (M-I)

I would say 5 or 6. Some of them they can relate to our problems. (F-I)

I would say 5 to 6 because they are so busy. TA 7 or 8 because sometimes during a break I ask a question. She says, "That's a good question." And I feel so wonderful. (F-I)

I would say around 7 or 6 because, depend on a professor. (M-I)

I would say 6 because in my course, I am in [program] and each course has three professors from different Faculties and giving different opinion in each class. And I am not quite sure like I will be afraid to ask. They have different opinions and they go wild in their direction during the lectures. (F-I)

Sometimes professors are very approachable. (F-I)

I phone my professor. I like my English professor – 9 or 10, she is very welcome and I didn't feel with other professors. I really like my English professor. (M-I)

### *Contacts with Academic Advisors, Departmental Secretaries and Other Staff*

Only a few students had contact with staff in their departments in general. For the most part, staff were described as helpful.

I've only gone with very small questions to ask in my department. Just about how to apply for the program. Just small things. (F-D)

For me at the beginning of year, even before the year started, I would call a lot in regards what courses I should be taking, not so much what are already required, but more so the elective courses . . . . Oh, yeah, they were very helpful. They gave whole bunch of options. (F-D)

I pass our [faculty] secretary four or five times a day, because their office right by the stairs in [faculty] Building, But I think I talked to them like three times and I don't think they know my name. (F-D)

As one student described, contact with the department occurred on many levels.

For [faculty], it is very easy to understand the website, especially the course selection. The website is very clear. I've never had any problem with that. They also have a session, even when we started school, it is the option going to that. One lady is a representative of our specific years, so she is very easy to contact. Whenever there are frequently asked questions, she actually emailed all of them, just in case you are wondering, it is the average, this is very easy. Plus we are such a tight group, the second year there are also for us, so the same questions all over again and again. Everyone is always around. Or even we can just even go to the hospital, and go to the administrations office and everyone is always available. It is not a problem in my faculty at all. (F-D)

Both international and domestic students appeared to be very pleased with their experiences with their academic advisors.

I tried to contact my [faculty] advisor; I tried to make an appointment. I would have liked to combine my major [program] and [program] and I went there to Computer Science secretary, they were very helpful. (M-D)

I actually went to see an advisor and after first meeting, she knew me afterwards and then after that, I just drop in and she would be able to talk. . . . It's really good and it's really good talking to her. It's that kind of sense of feeling that someone recognizes you and actually cares about you and like talking with her is really helpful about my classes and how they are going. Just getting a hold of her is really easy. The secretaries are really helpful too with information when she is not there. (F-D)

One student recounted a less than helpful experience:

For me I used to chat with a lot of advisors from different faculties very often because I was concerned about choosing my courses. I can chat very often; I can chat by email, by phone and making an appointment. I think those advisors, especially one, she don't want to answer my questions. She don't like to make an appointment with me, she wants to speak with me only on the phone. I cannot make an appointment with you, I can only email you. I don't like it. Other advisors are very helpful. (M-I)

International students spoke very highly of the international student advisors in their faculties or departments.

I am not sure about other faculties, but an international student advisor in [faculty] is fantastic. He is really accessible, open his book if he is busy and make an appointment. I already met him four, five times. You know that there is an academic or any kind of assistance, even financial advisor or something like that. It's not so much, he kind of helps you, he tries his best, not so much what is best, but how you do it, he goes along with and feels you welcome and someone is concerned about your well-being. I think this is very important. (M-I)

International Student Advisor in our faculty is very helpful. She is always very patient, answers my questions. (M-I)

The Faculty of [XXX] organized the meeting for international students last week and there were other people. It was very helpful. We got to talk to them about some issues that we didn't know who to talk to before we met them. After that we managed to get some of the answers from them. (M-I)

Other services used by students included volunteer tutoring groups, time management workshops, and the Writing Centre which were considered to be “really helpful.” However, international students reported very negative experiences with UBC Student Services, particularly in relation to information about scholarships and other sources of student financial aid.

I personally don't go to Brock Hall, but one of my best friends, he went there and inquire for scholarship because she is facing so of financial problem. Apparently, they were quite rude to him, because most scholarship are not extended to international students, when they persistently asking, they would say “You can go back to your home country and study there if you cannot afford it.” They didn't say it explicitly, but they gave this kind of impression. So he is really upset about it. (M-I)

I went to Brock Hall and asked for Student Loan. They didn't have and they didn't give me any suggestions. They would say, “Oh, we don't have anything for international students. Or you can apply for undergraduate scholarship but you have to have 85%.” I don't know whatever that was. That's what they told me and they didn't tell me anything else, something about financial loan. Nothing. What can I say? (F-I)

Before I came here I was told there are hundreds scholarships and Canada has some anti-discrimination policy based on citizenship, but so far, I haven't found any scholarships. I am not sure what it is. (M-I)

You can't find financial help. I know about other schools, but University of Alberta student loan for international student through scholarship that UBC doesn't really offer. (F-I)

Only one domestic student commented about Student Services. Her remarks were positive.

I think anything in Brock Hall it's really nice. The offices are right there, open to everyone. If you have trouble with housing you can go and talk to the person, which is so much easier, than trying to find it on line or fix it on line. It's just really nice to go and talk to the natural person to solve your problems. (F-D)

## *On-line Use, On-line Resources and Class Materials*

Students were asked to comment on the assumption that that 19 to 20 year olds today are very computer literate and to rate themselves in terms of computer proficiency. Very surprisingly, self ratings by both international and domestic students ranged from zero to seven with at least half from both groups rating their computer abilities as three or less. Those who were less proficient with computers made the following comments:

I don't have the patience for it all the time. I just be like, how to do it, show me, it will not take time. I try to find myself, I get really frustrated. It's not really easy. (F-D)

I try to [gain access to the library] at home, it's just very hard to type specific wording and all this. I am getting a little bit better and it just the concept how to do it. And I know they are constantly doing seminars how to use web pages and all that. That's good. I need somebody there, I wish that there would be somebody even in the Commons Block just very computer literate and you can go there and . . . "okay, this is to completely show us on computer, just remember and go to your house and do it." That would be good. (F-D)

I think for me, the on-line, the information is up there, it's really not good for me to access it because I am really not a computer person at all, it's really hard. I feel like going to someone and sit beside me and help me go through web pages, how to get to the page that has only the information I want. It's very frustrating. (F-D)

I just want to say that I hate computers. I wish I don't have to have them. They just make my life more complicated. I spent a lot of time on MSN and emails, I rather get letters from friends, I much rather talk to my prof. I don't feel comfortable contacting my prof, I keep emailing him her, but I wish that would not be true. I wish I would be more comfortable to talk instead of emailing. (F-I)

The more computer literate students were much more positive.

I think that the UBC Student Service Centre is pretty good. I am using a lot, checking my plan, looking for courses and searching like that. It's pretty useful and really fast to get like easy information, but it comes to more specific information, it's really hard just find the actual page where you find your information. (F-D)

If you look around there, it's really easy and helpful, but for the specific stuff, it's kind of hard to find the information there. (F-D)

It's less time, less problem. (M-I)

It takes a short time, it's convenient. You don't have to always go for application forms and then you have to mail it and you have to get a reply. (F-I)

Actually I use on-line resources . . . every day, Student Service Centre, I log on in every day, like to do a lot of different things to check it out like how many points I left in my meal card, what about my position on the waiting list for my housing. And I check it out my applications, I check it my grades, sometimes, and I use WebCT. I think a lot of people use WebCT for different courses, I use WebCT almost every day because I need to download my assignments and to discuss something. And I use different resources and actually when I have something to ask, first try to search on an internet not to telephone and stuff. Because I need to search for telephone numbers on internet, so I think on-line resources are kind of neat. (M-I)

Seven of the 14 international students reported having laptop wireless connections<sup>3</sup>. According to one student without wireless access,

It's a problem to find it. The wireless program is hard to find it. (M-I)

Those with wireless cards described some benefits and some glitches:

I have used my laptop for a while for two reasons: 1) internet in my room is not wireless, sometimes I need to use a computer almost all the time. So, if sometime they are repairing and I cannot use my internet in my room, I go to Commons Block and use wireless there, because the mutual guest connected to internet net every minute. And for another reason is, sometimes I try to study and I don't want to study in my own room, then I just use computers there, use the wireless. (M-I)

One time [the wireless service] was busy, at the beginning of the year, first semester; I didn't know where the access to the internet was and in my room didn't work it. So I went to the Sub and open my laptop and registered right away. It's pretty easy. (F-I)

I use wireless and so far, and it is a disadvantage because internet is good to be connected wireless, connected all the time. I don't want to walk everywhere. Only if I need to, I go to the library and there are so many computers there. I don't think the wireless is that indispensable. (M-I)

I have one situation myself; I was lost as soon as I arrived here. In my department people were on holiday and I couldn't work it out, so I took my laptop and I went to find some building, Computer Science building or Civil Engineering, it was the only way for me. I think the wireless is very good. I don't think a lot of university campuses have 100% coverage. (M-I)

The majority of both domestic and international students reported that their professors were using WebCT, individual web pages, or some other on-line resource to post class notes and other course information. Some students were very enthusiastic about course related on-line materials.

We have our own discussion board, notes and stuff. (M-I)

I use WebCT a lot because I have Chemistry lab. For like three lab in Chemistry I always go online to techniques and teach you how to do stuff, equipment before you enter the lab. So it's pretty helpful because is kind of know what you have to do in the lab. All you have to do is to find and go. It's pretty helpful. (F-I)

I use WebCT because I picked Computer Sciences courses and it's a good stuff, but I don't use WebCT for Commerce courses. Non-commerce courses are on WebCT. (M-I)

For others, these resources caused a certain level of frustration.

First term, all my classes basically they have all the notes typed out in the internet and it was like really helpful. But now they were kind of against having notes right there and the second semester having not notes at all, and do all dictation thing. (F-D)

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<sup>3</sup> Domestic students were not asked this question.

I know my course like for [course], one class, it was only single page, they told us how to do it, but it was too fast how to do it, too much info, I couldn't write it down, just click here and double click here. It was so confusing, it was good that at least they tried, but I need more. They constantly are updating something. (F-D)

For one of my courses, he doesn't put notes on line, so it's very difficult because it's so much. Usually I copy only half of that because he goes really fast. It's one of the big differences from having just print out and going over while he is going over with us . . . a lot of people asked him, he doesn't do it. It's just really hard. (F-D)

Others admitted that they underutilized the resources available:

In first term, I didn't really use all my resources, like when you turn your textbook over, it's usually a website there. I found a wonderful one for Psychology, you don't have to make flash cards because it is a flash card game on the website and it's so useful. And I think I spent too much time not doing things that I could have done quicker on website, like making flash card and stuff. But this has like extra practice quizzes and stuff, and I really didn't use those websites. And this term is going on a lot better. (F-D)

Sometimes, even though they put [notes] on the website, a lot of times are something wrong with that, you don't have the right program for it, you can't get hold of program or some scripts you can't just print out, that's what happened a lot of times last semester. I couldn't access it from my laptop, I could read them on my laptop, but I couldn't print them out, and have with me in class. (F-D)

Such difficulties led some students to comment that they would prefer hard copies of professors' notes.

Once one prof last semester 40 pages of chapter, it was very hard to keep up. At the end of the course he just asked if it would be better I just print it out the booklet and sell to everybody. He did and it was a lot better. You not wasting you time trying to figure out computer stuff. It was right there. (F-D)

I was stuck with my laptop and I couldn't do any side notes on my laptop on them. It was really helpful just having a hard copy of it. (F-D)

Yet, other students preferred electronic versions of notes.

You can just add to it and highlight important things and throw out the pages that don't matter. If you have everything right there in front of you, even reading websites, I found it way easy to print it off and look at it than will be able to look at the computer screen. (F-D)

As students' comments indicate, it is not accurate to assume that all new undergraduate students are computer literate and that they are readily willing and able to gain access to resources and course materials on-line.

### ***SOCIAL INTEGRATION***

Social integration is defined "as the interaction between the individual with given sets of characteristics (backgrounds, values, commitments) and other persons of varying characteristics within the [university]" (Tinto, 1975, p.107). Social integration can be described by the degree of

congruency between the individual and social environment. Tinto further explains that social integration occurs primarily through informal peer group associations, semi-formal extracurricular activities, and interaction with faculty and administrative personnel. In this sense, successful encounters can be achieved in varying degrees through social communication, friendship and faculty support, and collective affiliation.

According to Spady (1971), individual perceptions of social integration are directly associated with persistence, but even if the individual perceives her or himself as not being congruent with the social climate of the university, sufficient friendship support can still lead to social integration. In their conceptualization of social integration, Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) include involvement in extracurricular activities, peer-group relations and the frequency of informal contacts with faculty members (for the purposes of discussing campus issues, socializing informally, or resolving personal problems).

In this section, social integration is discussed under the following headings: extracurricular activities, residence experiences, the housing lottery, the U-Pass, friends on and off campus, friendship with international students, friendship patterns, and parental influence.

### *Extracurricular Activities*

First year undergraduate participants recognized the importance of extracurricular activities while studying in university. Almost all focus group participants – both domestic and international – participated in some type of activity, including sports, performing arts, and on-campus extracurricular activities such as the “Imagine Initiative,” movies, shopping and the international peer program. The following are a few examples of students’ descriptions of these activities:

I play volleyball, I joined U Trek team. It’s really fun, it’s just once a week. We really suck. That’s okay. It’s entertaining; something to do and it’s close. (F-D)

I enjoyed orchestra, I have a club membership and I can go a few times a week. And I try to see as many concerts as I can. Just to get out, I definitely agree, it is so much better and very refreshing to get off campus and see something different. (F-D)

I am very involved at school. I am in a volleyball team; I also joined CVC which is Chinese Varsity Club. Even though it is for Chinese people, there are a lot of races in it. It’s very good because it is not just for my culture, but other people can do it too. (F-D)

I am very athletic and when I get stressed out from studying, I need to go to Gym with my friends. I have joined the Ski Club at UBC and they have very good deals on lift tickets and everything. So I enjoy going snowboarding with my friends. (F-D)

I enjoy stuff like I never played American football, I just pick it up and it's really kind of fun. It's fun learning it and ball hockey and stuff. I realized, everybody is telling. "Just join in. Nobody knows how to play." (F-I)

I go to gallery. . . . Then on the weekend I go to ski trip. So I was pretty busy, and make sure that I study all the time. (F-I)

Extracurricular activities provided students with the opportunity to cross cultural boundaries and engage in completely new experiences.



As the following comments indicate, international students participating in the international peer program were very supportive and enthusiastic.

We meet and walk around the campus, it was a race or something, but you don't feel like a race, you just walk around the campus. (M-I)

I go really well with my peer and she joins me in Geography course, so we are classmates and we meet every week and go to class together. (F-I)

Compared to first term, students were better connected with their peers.

### ***Residence Experiences***

Domestic students continued to provide rave reviews about their residence experiences.

It's great. There are so many people, every faculty and everyone is very diverse. We live together and you we've got to know people very well, and diversity is really good. It's a big distraction sometimes, but it's really good network of people to have. (F-D)

I absolutely love living in residence. So many people all the time, everybody invite each other, we make friends, and I never lived with friends in high school. You just realize how good to be friends with so many different people, it's so much more respecting in university and we have to live and get along with each other. It's really great. (F-D)

It's just amazing. Everybody should try to live in res in some point. It's really interesting, it's much better. (F-D)

International students reported enjoying living in residence. However, they were more critical of the degree of integration among domestic and international students.

I think the experience is really good. You get more chances to know more people and you make friends. But I don't think we have enough communication with Canadians because usually on my floor, lots of them there are Canadians, but I don't get many chances really to know them, but just like "hi-bye" friends. (F-I)

I was talking to Canadians and they were saying that international students, East Asian students are really exclusive and I think they get annoyed that they don't feel that they can enter their groups. But . . . I talked to other international students and they feel that about Canadians. It's kind of weird, there is a lot of internationalism, but there also exclusive groups, not exclusive, but it so of seems segmented. (F-I)

International students indicated that the feeling of segregation by racial/ethnic group extended beyond residence. As one student stated, "*it's everywhere.*"

I find it especially true in res.; I mean you can't get along with everybody and to be really friendly. And they party a lot, which is good. Just besides that, it's basically on the superficial level, it's not so much like intimidating to join them, I do join them once a while, but I guess you feel more comfortable and you hang out with people who are most similar to yourself. So it's naturally, is just like things just fall to place. It's just a tendency to follow people who are the same. (M-I)

I do get very good friends living in my residence on the same floor, there are people from Korea. We became very good friends, but except these ones, all my other friends are from China, all Chinese people. So, I think, probably, we meet daily because we are always happy to talk to people with the same language. I feel very comfortable to talk to some people from Asia, if they are not from China, they are from Korea, Japan, and some place else. It's some kind of same culture that we understand each other, so after I don't have really Canadian friends, we just say "Hi" and "Bye," we don't really talk too much. (M-I)

Especially when you go home you would like to be with people who you are comfortable with and who are just like you. Or they speak the same language with you; it's just natural to stick with people. (F-I)

A couple of male international students pointed out that they could be enticed to join Canadian students if they offered to share their beer.

Some "minor" rifts resulted because of the differences between the Canadian "partying" culture and the cultural practices of other groups.

I had some problems. . . . I really went to bed very early, I am getting up at 5 or 6. This is my lifestyle, but living with different kind of people. In my upstairs, they try to play different games like basketball at eleven. We cannot go to bed. Some people outside my door they are talking happily, but I am not happy. I cannot get to sleep, they have little party, they chat very happily, but I am not happy. (M-I)

The mandatory meal plans in residence remained unpopular with international students.

I got food poisoning from that. I went to the hospital three times, because, seriously, I am not kidding, I get food poisoning from that food. (F-I)

I gained 20 pounds since I came. It's really disgusting, my eating habits are really bad here comparing to home. (F-I)

Complaints by commuters remain consistent with those of students from the first focus group sessions. Both international and domestic students lamented the long commute to campus, reduced access to campus resources, and a less full social life. Having friends who live in residence was considered an asset. Although all commuters cite numerous advantages to living on residence, the one advantage to living off residence was the ability to better control their study environments.

These findings support Pascarella's (1985) contention that structural characteristics of higher education institutions, such as the degree of integration or involvement in the institution's social and academic systems, influence student experiences and, subsequently, student development. In another study, (Johnson, 1997) asserts that "academic and social integration is important not only for residential students but also for commuters. A sense of community appears to be very important to the retention of students, regardless of their on-campus or off-campus residential status" (¶ 30). An unanticipated event – the housing lottery – was perceived as a clear threat to the social integration and wellbeing of students.

## ***The Housing Lottery***

For both domestic and international students, the housing lottery for places in residence in 2004-2005 was a particularly hot issue.

[The] lottery system . . . I am so against that. I think that the lottery system should be only for the local [students.] (F-D)

People from Ontario shouldn't be there. (F-D)

I know bunch of international students they want to find housing, and they are 18 and, they so scared, they don't know what to do. (F-D)

People, my friends, they are guaranteed housing first year, some people would gone to a different institution, had they known anywhere they can have it, they are not happy and they don't know what to do. I don't know why school couldn't have told them last year. It's really awful. (F-D)

As these remarks indicate, domestic students were clearly upset. However, as the following remarks demonstrate, international students were incensed:

It's not for international students because we don't know anyone here. . . . it's very difficult for international students. (M-I)

Because we pay much more than Canadian students. They are at home. Even though my friends on dorm from the island, they know everything about Canada, the city and culture that we cannot get it. (F-I)

But their rational is that everyone has the same chance to get housing, for example, like Canadian who lives in Surrey, he might be from the poor income family as opposed to high income international student. There are more options, to get more affordable housing for these students and something like that. We are so detached from the system. It's lot more difficult for an international student to go through out of the trouble and get the housing. . . . Like for me, for example, 60 out of 83 on the waiting list. . . . It's like a joke. Yah, you are on the waiting list. Come on? (M-I)

To add insult to injury, students were charged to participate in the lottery:

You know we pay \$50.00 only for participating in the lottery, it's okay for those like the lottery winners. . . . but I think for those lottery losers, it's waste of their money. (M-I)

Students felt misled and betrayed. Had they known that they would have to participate in a lottery system for residence in second year, they may have chosen a different university for first year.

I was very lucky, I think it is very cool because when I came here from Hong Kong last year, I was told that I was guaranteed to get housing. Suddenly it is a big switch, no housing at all, you have to be put into lottery and there's no security underneath that, you have to find your own housing. I was told that about that when I first came, it would be something on my mind. (M-I)

If you told us at the beginning, our decision would be different. When I applied here, I was given an impression once you get here you will get guarantee housing first year. After that, it would continue if we want to. Now, suddenly they changed that. (M-I)

International students pointed out that because they were not permitted to work off campus, living off residence did not make any sense.

Sorry that we don't have the same opportunity to get a job off campus. So it's like you are living in Kitsilano, and you are working there also, it's kind of worth to live off campus, but as we are, I don't really know who can get job off campus. (F-I)

When asked whether they could do anything about the situation, one student responded, “What can we do?”

It's really nothing we can do about this. It's not their fault, they can't do anything about it because it's up to the housing board. What can we do about it? Make a big deal, make a fuss, come on?! Petition? Does it change anything? Realistically, it will not make any difference. (M-I)

But we are international students. It's different. (M-I)

Every international student tried to question something and it doesn't make any difference. (F-I)

They should be in a lottery, because part of the university experience is to live in residence they should be in lottery and people who live further away like Toronto or we, international students should have a priority. (F-I)

International students felt helpless and unheard about their housing situation for the upcoming year.

### ***Mandatory U-Pass***

Unlike the housing lottery, the U-Pass system was considered to be a great success.

It's great. (F-D)

That's the best invention in UBC. (F-I)

The best invention, the replacement for \$20.00. (F-I)

For people in residence, you get \$5.00 refund every month, because they don't use their pass much as other people. (F-I)

A few students had purchased annual parking passes, and hence were not keen about the extra \$20.00 per month charge.

I agree too. Since a gas price is going up, actually I bought an annual parking pass and I didn't know – I couldn't know – that I can use U-pass. So I spent a lot of money on parking and U-pass. I was going to use it until April, but after I found the U-pass and the gas is going up, I cannot afford that much. So now I am using the U-pass and I am commuting to school by bus. I think it's very economic to use the U-pass. (F-D)

The housing lottery and the U-Pass program demonstrate, in contrasting ways, the effects of university policies on undergraduate students.

### *Friends On and Off Campus*

Similar to the findings of the first focus groups, whereas students in residence tended to have friends from residence, commuter students met their friends in class or maintained old friendships from high school. When asked about extent to which they socialized with international students, domestic students responded very positively.

One of my best friends is an international student. I actually when I arrived to UBC, it is amazing; I met three people from South Africa. It's really cool. (F-D)

I think living on res, the experience to meet all these people from Australia, London, Japan, all over the places. Now I can go traveling all over the world. And they will give a tour around the world, which is really very good. (F-D)

Probably half that I met are international students. It's very interesting to see that I am from Saskatchewan, it is very small population of Asians. It's very great to come to UBC and experience so many different cultures. When 10 years of your life you as a minority as opposed to balance between both. (F-D)

Few international students reported having Canadian friends.

International students from home country, but I also have friends from domestic students here. I stay down during Christmas, I didn't go home during Christmas and I share with Canadian family. (F-I)

I live off campus, all my friends – most of them – are domestic students, who are my friends from high school. I haven't met any Korean international students, because I don't live in residence. (F-I)

I have one good Canadian friend and she is my neighbour. (F-I)

When asked whether they would prefer their friendship patterns to be different, international students offered the following:

Well, before I really settled at UBC, I was more with Canadian friends and not from Hong Kong and now sometimes Canadian friends asked me out and then I say, "I have an appointment with Hong Kong people, I am sorry." Maybe it is cultural thing, it is good to have a taste of it, but it's not that fantastic to hang out all the time. (F-I)

I came here and I was very ambitious, I honestly wanted all my friends to be Canadians. Then, it doesn't really matter anymore because I am in an environment that I can practice English whenever I want. (M-I)

I think I have a quite number of domestic Canadian friends, I guess that over time I feel like less comfortable hanging with them, rather than with other international students. It's not like . . . I would not hang out with them as often as with other international students. . . . It's not harder, just I feel less comfortable because I can't identify with them like with people with similar background. (M-I)

I have mostly international friends from Costa Rica, Guatemala, Venezuela . . . because they are good friends because they speak Spanish. But I found Canadian students, just because they live off campus, it's just hard because they live in different places, it's far. I am not as strong to make friends. (F-I)

According to international focus group participants, cultural differences and understandings led to communication barriers:

If they talk about movies, music, we can't join in. And girls talk all those things. (F-I)

Every Canadian, most of my roommates are Canadians, even girls, most of them know older names, older Canuck players and I know two or three. (M-I)

When I first came here, when I first watched hockey, I couldn't find the puck. They started to keep fighting each other and I . . . it's not something that you like just say, "Uh, it's fun." (M-I)

I really found hard that you try so hard to know them and their culture and then sometimes, I get so frustrated that they don't know anything about me. So, it's not a matter of community, it's just the matter if they are worldly and know, they are just international people. (F-I)

Also, differences in educational goals may be responsible for limited socialization among domestic and international students.

I came here for the purpose of learning language and I understand that they came for purpose of studying, so we came here from different angles. And the fact that people here are not so friendly, I don't really worry about it. (M-I)

Canadian students, according to international counterparts, can be cliquish, and as such, exclude non-Canadians from joining in on their activities.

Sometimes I feel that they don't really try to talk to you much because they have each other, This kind of thing. People on my floor we talk to each other, it's neat stuff, that's fine. Sometimes outside, you just don't really try, because I guess they feel like they have their own gang already, that's fine. (F-I)

I am a stranger because I am not at home and then after one school day I am so tired I don't want to hear all problems anymore. (F-I)

Clearly, social integration of international with domestic students requires more effort than simply having them co-exist in the same institution. As Lucina (2002) points out, international students often face problems adjusting to their new environment in the form of language diversity, cultural differences, inability to form social friendships (sometimes due to different conceptions of friendship), and crisis situations related to the transition to a new culture and social environment. In order to retain international students, university campuses need to plan activities that encourage, support, and nurture social interaction between the international and domestic students.

## ***Parental Influence***

Students were asked to discuss the extent to which they had relied on their family for financial assistance, social support and emotional support since September.

My parents are helping me financially and definitely when I came here I asked, "Mommy, Daddy, please help me." They are good for that. Emotional support, just recently, I am just starting to talk to my parents because we were not too good before I left. Now, because of distance, it's getting a lot better between me and my parents. I am starting to feel more open, how things are being here and about my problems. They are helpful, obviously. (F-D)

Domestic students communicated with parents primarily by phone. One student mentioned contact by MSN. Contact occurred for an average of two times per week.

We use MSN, me and my mom, and we call each other too. Maybe we talk on the phone once a week and on MSN every second day. (F-D)

I am fairly dependent financially on my parents, and emotionally too. I talk to my parents probably twice a week for total like three hours. And the phone bill which they pay for. So far it is really important for them to talk to me, and communicate what's happening as they cannot be here for me. It's important. (F-D)

I call with my parents a couple times a week. A lot of times with my mom, many times she is really busy, she would be like, and "I have to go to this appointment." I felt rushed. But financially they are there 100%. If you need for real thing, they will restore you. Emotionally, they are definitely there, a lot of things that they don't understand, but they try and they do what they can. (F-D)

Parents, according to students, are more important for helping to finance studies than for emotional support:

For me is a lot of financial support from my family, but a lot of emotional stuff would go with friends, it's a lot of venting through them, so they are I talk to. I talk to my mom probably every day mostly, just to say not to say emotional things, but just what you eat for supper, just to check out on me if I am actually taking care of myself as opposed to how am I doing emotionally. (F-D)

One student commented that "*13 thousand miles between you and your parents sometimes is nice.*"

Domestic students who lived at home continued to rely on financial and emotional support from parents and other family members.

Yeah, but my parents support me financially with everything. I was working for fun. I don't need to work. My parents are usually there. I am not at home very often since I started university. I usually either study a lot, and doing other stuff. They understand that, if I don't come for a dinner, they don't really think because I am busy now. (F-D)

My mom is supporting me financially and emotionally, I think I discuss things with my friends better than with my family. (F-D)

Emotionally I discuss things with my brother, financial support, I have a student loan and live at home. (M-D)

When international students were asked about parental support, one student blurted, “*We don't have a choice. We are international students.*” New technologies and related parental competence permeated the way both international and domestic students communicate with their families.

Usually phone, my mom doesn't know how to use the mouse. We still want to talk on the phone. (F-I)

Actually, for my parents, they learned how to use computer about one week before I came here I taught them how to use computer and now we chatting on MSN. So, we use voice message, voice chat, and we use web cam, and they can see me. (M-I)

There was some indication that international students resisted too regular contact with their parents. Initially, some international students were homesick. However, by February, contact was described as “*getting less*” and “*when [my parents] need it.*”

They call me, I never call back. They call me every two weeks. Or every three weeks and then we talk for a half an hour. (F-I)

When I talk with my mom she started to complain because she couldn't find me because I was not in dorm. (F-I)

It really depends. Usually I am always online, if they have time, we voice chatting, voice chatting we usually do about not every day, just about every two days on computer. And web cam we do about two weeks. It's not very long, usually we discuss, talk about 5 minutes, or 10 minutes. But long conversation on web cam we usually do once in two weeks. (M-I)

Both domestic and international students relied on and appreciated financial support provided by parents. Both groups, however, expressed the need to separate themselves from strong emotional attachments with their parents.

### ***PLANS FOR NEXT YEAR***

Students were asked to describe their plans for the 2004-05 academic year. Domestic students were united in their response – they planned to stay at UBC next year and beyond.

I am planning to have my Bachelor Degree in UBC and maybe Masters or PhD in Computer Sciences. (M-D)

I am planning to stay here. I will see, I am really excited in the program I am going to. If I don't get into it, I would probably consider going somewhere else. I just really love Vancouver, and I've had such a great experience here. The more time I spend here more I like it. I really appreciate it. (F-D)

My plan is stay here for next year, for five years, and after that I would like to go somewhere else just because I would like to change for a little bit. Somewhere else to do it. (F-D)



I'll definitely come back here. I love Vancouver, what university offers and everybody I met here is really good. (F-D)

I'll definitely stay at UBC because I love it. I did actually think to go to SFU since it is just 5 minutes away, but I decided that UBC is definitely way better, just campus is way better. (F-D)

Two domestic students had entertained other options, but have opted to remain at UBC.

I am trying to stay at UBC next year because first year it was frustrating for me about the environment, but it was also learning experience. And I want to study more. (F-D)

The only reason I have even considered else[where] is also being considered closer to my home. I was only once home since August. That's okay, but hard sometimes. (F-D)

For some international students, there was no choice.

I have no choice, I have to stay here. [My scholarship] requires me to stay here. Even if I can't get housing, I try my best to do get a grant, it requires the average over 74% for admission to graduate. I try to maintain my average over 74. (F-I)

For me is the same, I have to stay here. I can only stay at UBC because UBC can give me scholarship. So, I must stay here and study harder to maintain GPA to continue to get the scholarship. So I have no choice, just work hard and work hard in my studies. (F-I)

This student remained tentative about completing all her undergraduate years at UBC.

I am not sure if I want to stay here till I graduate. . . . I think I will stay here. It's free for me. In Hong Kong I have to pay tuition fee. Here is cheaper. (F-I)

Several international students were pleased with Vancouver and UBC and intended to stay.

I would stay because UBC is great, Vancouver is nice, and Whistler is near by. Within Canada I wouldn't choose anywhere else than that. I was offered to U of T and Dalhousie, Nova Scotia but I chose UBC in spite. The only reason why I transfer if I would go the U.S. or something. Right now is very likely that I would stay here. (M-I)

I would like to stay because I don't like moving. I like UBC, leadership stuff and volunteering. I would definitely choose UBC over SFU. (F-I)

I am going to transfer, but not UBC or Vancouver, just the major I am looking for, just the specific department. (F-I)

A few other international students were considering transferring to other universities.

I would like to transfer to Europe because it is a cluster of countries, more geographical, international, just more opportunities. (F-I)

I may transfer to U of T this year because they have program I want to do there rather than here. The only reason I chose UBC is because of the brochure, the picture on the brochure. Other than that it's not a reason why I was going to come here because the program is pretty general. The picture of the Gage facing the sea. And I only see that when I walk there. When I look out my window I see the forest. (F-I)

These students commented that “*UBC is really good in promoting itself*” and “*very good in advertising themselves.*” When asked whether UBC lived up to the promotional materials, the issue of the housing lottery resurfaced.

Some ways yes, I think the campus is really nice, but in a sense I guess I am a bit disappointed that we didn't win lottery. (M-I)

The lack of guaranteed housing in second year was considered a major disincentive for staying at UBC.

Yes, definitely. (M-I)

Yes, and also if you do live off campus, I mean the campus is isolated and you would have to have the transport, commute time. (F-I)

If you live off campus, if you have to take a cheap housing in the eastside of Vancouver which is far, you have to use Translink and travel to school over one hour. And that is really very inconvenient. (F-I)

For one student, lottery or not, she intended to stay.

I love UBC and I will definitely stay here and finish my school because of my general experience. (F-I)

However, for others, the LPI was as much of a disincentive as the housing issue to stay at UBC.

I think I will stay if I can stay because now I am facing a problem of LPI first year engineering. For engineering you have to pass the LPI before the end of August. So you can register for the second year course. So if you can't pass your LPI before August, they will drop your registration, so no course to take during the second year, only English and LPI. So you may waste one year here just study English, it's kind of pointless. I don't really have any other problems in other courses, science and math. I did pretty well; just LPI gives me a big problem now. (F-I)

Several students had taken the LPI five times or more, but could not earn a grade greater than 4. The need to earn a grade of 5 continued to haunt them.

We need a five. I went to a Writing Centre and my tutor told me, “Your essay is okay; you just need to try to get rid of the minor errors.” I read my essay during exam more than ten times, but there maybe are still some small errors. (F-I)

I don't understand that. We had a visiting professor in my Geography class today. He tries to get a job here and he is from another country and your English is better than his and he is going to get a job. And you are studying here and understanding English better, and putting phrases together. (F-I)

I am in Arts faculty and I have to write an essay every course and then I take one per year course and the mark would be quite harsh for just fresh student. And then for an essay I got 80%, I don't have problem with writing essays. (F-I)

Yet, this student had taken the LPI five times without achieving a grade of 5. “*It's ironic, right?*” Other students agreed.

It's something wrong about LPI. For example, I take History courses with a lot of writing, we have to write essays, and I get 80% and up and I don't understand because I passed it. I took TOEFL test and my score was very high and I don't understand why [the problem with the] LPI. I don't understand why people can't get 5. What is the funny thing when you take the LPI, they are all Asian, nobody else is there. And I don't understand why is like that? (F-I)

I wonder if Canadian student would pass the LPI. (F-I)

The LPI was viewed by international students as an unnecessary and toxic requirement by UBC that served to humiliate, and not in any way benefit, students.

### *COMMITMENT TO UBC*

According to Tinto (1975), it is necessary to distinguish between dropouts who are academic dismissals and who are voluntary withdrawals. This author states three combinations of students and behaviour associated with dropout: students with good academic competence but low commitment tend to withdraw voluntarily and either transfer to another institution or reenrol at the same institution later; students with poor academic performance and high commitment tend to persist until forced to withdraw for academic reasons; and students with low academic performance and low commitment tend to withdraw permanently from the institution.

Students were asked to discuss the extent they felt committed to UBC. The domestic group was very enthusiastic about declaring their commitment to the university.

There are things that they bother me, little things, but generally when I go home and people asked me and I would say, "Oh, UBC is a great school. Vancouver is awesome." I have only good things to say about it. I am really excited talking about it. (F-D)

I try to get my friends here and call them that they would love it here. (F-D)

International students were more critical:

UBC is about second best university in Canada. I do give them that UBC is very good, although I don't think that so, but I always say to my friend that UBC is good, is great. (M-D)

I would say that UBC is great, I would recommend it to study here at UBC, but it's not good for international students. (F-I)

When asked to elaborate, this student asserted that UBC offered fewer scholarships and other financial support for students. However, compared to American universities, UBC was considered a bargain.

In the United States is considered more expensive because 9 out 10 schools I applied would cost me close to US \$40,000.00 per year. The cost is a big factor. (F-I)

All universities sell merchandise emblazoned with their logos. Do today's UBC students buy t-shirts, clothing, binders and other things with the UBC logo? Only one domestic student admitted

to having purchased UBC memorabilia for herself; others either planned to do so or bought them as gifts. Such merchandise was considered to be expensive.

When I leave I will probably buy a sweater or something. (F-D)

I buy t-shirts for my family, but I don't have one myself. (M-D)

Something like that. When I go back home I will definitely buy something. I will buy sweater and stuff. I like it here, everybody should come. (F-D)

Just saying "University of British Columbia," it's a pride thing, but for a t-shirt with the University of British Columbia on it, \$25.00 very proud, not that proud. I bought a spring shirt when I was going home, but I wished that would be a little bit cheaper, \$70.00. (F-D)

A few international students had purchased these items for themselves or as gifts, but in general, they were "very expensive" unlike at their home universities where such items were inexpensive or free and used to advertise the university.

It's actually very funny because universities in Hong Kong. . . . everything in university is cheaper than outside university, because university students don't have income. But everything here is almost twice as much as outside just because it is UBC. (M-I)

Every time I join activities in Hong Kong University, they offer you a free T-shirt or stuff . . . to promote. That is a sense of belonging for the students. At UBC, we have to buy the sense of belonging. (F-I)

If it is cheaper, I would buy it. (F-I)

I do identify with the university, but not to the extent that I would pay \$80.00 for sweatshirt. I mean it's nice, for \$40.00 I would buy it, but not \$80.00. (M-I)

For one student, the lack of familiarity with UBC by his friends and family made gifts with the UBC logo rather meaningless.

I got a problem because my friends in China they don't know UBC, so I say, "I study at UBC." They, "What? Where is UBC?" "UBC is in Canada." "So you are studying in Canada." Because I think UBC is not known in China. Only my friends know UBC, when I show gifts to them, they are very expensive, I will choose something with UBC on it, t-shirt and small things. (M-I)

Focus group participants were then asked to indicate the extent to which the label "UBC student" was part of their identity. They were also asked whether they were satisfied with their experiences at UBC. Domestic students focussed on the identity question.

For me is like the UBC is a big part of my identity, everybody from my high school stayed there, from the ones that went away I was the only one to go to UBC. . . . The other university from the other people from far east they would say, "Oh yeah, it was fine." That's all that they would say. I am just all excited and explaining that UBC is amazing because of an environment, first of all, we got mountains, there are more trees here than in whole Saskatchewan. It's crazy for me and really big part of me and I am very proud of too. (F-D)

UBC is definitely part of me. When I go home, we have U of T which is a good university too, but being from somewhere different than home, my girlfriend came up and she says, "Your campus is so nice, all those green patches." She saw York, which is very clean and boring, then is like, "Maybe I can come here." Yeah, come and bring everybody else. It's really good, I love saying that. And it meets all my academic stuff. (F-D)

International students addressed the satisfaction dimension. Most students felt underwhelmed, and hence dissatisfied with first year courses.

Maybe just for first year, I am learning all old stuff, which like 80% I learned before. Even the things I never learned before, I think the standard is quite low compare to the things I learned before. (F-I)

I like the courses at UBC, only the second and third year level courses. I really hate first year courses are boring. (F-I)

I like my Computer courses because I am taking mostly senior courses. I find really smart people in Computer Science class. Some of them are really smart, I enjoy learning with them. (F-I)

One student complained that because he did not get credit for more difficult courses he had taken in another system "*because it is the PAC and British system and not North American system,*" first year courses at UBC were repetitive and unchallenging.

## ***QUALITY OF LIFE***

Students were asked to rate their quality of life on a scale of one to 10. Unlike other ratings offered by students in the second focus groups, domestic students rated their quality of life lower with more scores in the six or seven range.

I think I would be like 6, the quality of life, living on campus is really good, . . . [However], I don't get to go to Gym, I don't get out of my house, I am just very lazy now and I know that I am happy when I am doing stuff. I can't get myself to do it. (F-D)

Living on res can be like living in a dark hole. . . . It is so hard even to get out of bed, I don't have energy to do things and I am not motivated. I don't know why, I was not like that before. I know a lot of people saying that every time I asked someone, "How are you doing?" They would say. "Tired." Every day, "I am tired, I am tired, I am tired." (F-D)

I slept two day straight and I felt I need more. (F-D)

International students' scores ranged from "minus two" to 10. The housing issue and quality of food were the focus of their complaints.

10 – except for housing and food poisoning. (F-I)

Because housing minus 2, obviously. (M-I)

We miss our food back home. (M-I)

Especially every day we eat our food in cafeteria. (F-I)

I don't think the people in caff care because I worked there in the caff and they take all money from us. They don't really care. And they recycle the food that I never seen before in my life. (M-I)

Living on residence you are very vulnerable to catch a cold from everyone, and bathrooms are disgusting. This is another thing of communal living. (F-I)

Students were asked to share their greatest academic and non-academic challenge over the past seven months. Domestic students used the words “*commitment*” and “*motivation*.”

It's just committing yourself doing that, saying to yourself, “You should [complete the optional exercises] that if it is helpful, you will need that afterwards. That was probably the hardest thing to motivate myself. (F-D)

Definitely hardest academic problem is knowing that I have to do something and that you have a midterm. Not going out and just study hard, it was very hard to me to commit myself, there are so many distractions. (F-D)

I would say motivation. In high school usually teachers push you to study and to get high marks. In university I found out we have to motivated by ourselves, we have to push ourselves to study. If I don't finish this and I don't push myself to study. I do not go out to have fun with my friends. (F-D)

Non-academic challenges included “*health*” and “*making friends in big classes*.”

For international students, lack of success with the LPI, the cost of taking – and retaking – the test, and no or limited feedback or assistance to improve posed the greatest challenge.

The biggest academic challenge must be the LPI. . . . I took it already ten times and I failed nine times. And the last result is not released yet. I am losing confidence. I don't think that my writing is that bad, I just keep getting 4, sometimes I even get 3. I am really frustrated, the price keep rising. The last year it was \$43.00 and now is \$45.00. Every time I review my paper I have to pay \$30.00. (M-I)

They have no comments. It's not that they would tell you how to write. That just says. “Wrong, wrong, wrong.” (M-I)

Grammar mistakes. What kind of view is that? . . . “Oh, you got grammar mistake, go and do grammar.” It's so frustrating. (M-I)

Students were asked to describe their greatest academic joys. Both domestic and international students focussed on achievement, learning and being challenged.

Success. (F-D)

Academic joy as I mentioned before I have to keep my average for about 74% and in my first term I got 73.75%. It's very close to 74%. That is a joy! (F-I)

Joy would be like learning a lot of stuff. Not just what we learned in high school, but something new and meaningful. For instance, in History I learned something that doesn't affect you personally, but how society was formed, how French was like before and probably today and how we are now. Why we do these things now and how we learned throughout the history. (F-I)

I have one academic joy. Educational system is very different from Hong Kong. People ask a lot of questions, which I like a lot. I like this informative approach. (F-I)

When asked if they could go back and start all over from September, what would they do the same and what would they do differently, students commented that they would have chosen another residence, sought out more senior students for assistance, studied differently, or established a regular fitness regime.

Students were asked to speculate about what UBC could do differently to enhance the first year student experience. Domestic students offered minor recommendations, including extended cafeteria hours, larger and better fitness facilities, more information available in the Commons block and more activities on weekends. When it was pointed out to them that they had not mentioned anything about teaching and learning, they said the following:

Better teachers. . . . [There was] an article on the University Plan, someone said that the President wanted to make the university better, smaller class size, so they would have TAs teaching the courses, and we as well the second year friends I hang out with, they don't think it's good because it is smaller class, you want your TAs to be very well informed and they are not well informed. The action will have more sense; have a prof who teaches classes. . . . They should need to focus on good profs. (F-D)

Your professor should know how to teach. (F-D)

I rather extend the class and be taught good information than sitting in small classroom and doing nothing. (F-D)

It's really having a prof who wants to be there, as opposed to just teaching just because I had a prof he knew that he didn't want to be there, if you don't want to be there too, you are wasting your time. (F-D)

For international students, eliminating the LPI was the main thing they wished UBC would change.

Get rid of LPI. It's a pain. Because we came here to learn, but they require LPI before we study anything. (F-I)

We are not learning anything with LPI. (M-I)

A related issue was the ability to choose their English instructors.

If we must have English courses, UBC will allow us to choose professors. I would choose easier professor. I don't want to fail English course. (M-I)

Also, they wanted UBC to guarantee on campus housing in second year.

## *TU'UM EST*

In closing, students were asked if they knew the motto of UBC. Whereas domestic students could not readily identify the phrase, most of the international students quickly offered that it was "*Tu'um est.*" When told that there are two interpretations, the more common was "It's yours." However, the second interpretation is "it's up to you" (Stewart, 1990). Focus group participants were asked which interpretation was more relevant for them. Both the domestic and international group were unanimous in their responses – definitely "*it's up to you!*"

It's up to you. The information is all there for you, you just get there. You have to do it, it's you. (F-D)

You have so many resources that are disposable. We have 22 libraries but if you never go to them, they are not going to help you. (F-D)

It's definitely you. (F-D)

When asked about the role of the institution, students were somewhat bewildered.

I don't see how university . . . . I don't see it that way. I don't know how that works. For me, university holds everything and you have to go . . . . I don't see how [the university] could be an agent. (F-D)

The Profs don't run after you, there is an extra thing that you should know, let's go find out. (F-D)

You can go and experience university, but it would not be part of you until you embrace it. (F-D)

International students concurred.

I think it is "Up to you." What you can do. You can just go around and look for it, you can get it. When you stay where you are, you can't get anything. You need to go around, join leadership, it makes you experience valuable. (F-I)

Finally, students were asked to consider the extent to which they were typical of first year students at UBC? Both international students agreed they were fairly typical of the first year student population. As one international student explained,

We have people didn't pass LPI, we have people didn't get housing, people want to transfer to another faculty. (F-I)

However, the international group pointed out that there were no European, East Indian, South American or Australian students in their focus group.



## DISCUSSION

*We will never get the first year experience right. We need to continue to monitor how our students are experiencing our first year programs and continue to change and develop them (Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001, p.198).*

Tinto (1987, 1993) emphasizes that initial university experiences are critical. First year students can achieve greater success in terms of social and academic well-being and be prevented from withdrawal, lack of commitment or disillusionment when their learning experiences during this crucial first year are enhanced. Studies of American (e.g., Barefoot, 2000) Canadian (e.g., Andres, Andruske, & Hawkey, 1996a; Andres & Guppy, 1991; Benjamin, 1990) and Australian (e.g., Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001) first year student experiences confirm that their initial experiences on campus are important and do influence their persistence in higher education.

The findings reported in this study support the claims of Tinto and others. In total, 43 students participated in four focus groups conducted at two points in time during their first year of study at UBC. The sample size of this study was small; however, students did not consider themselves to be extraordinary. From their perspectives, their experiences mirrored those of first year students around them.

Some of the findings from the first focus groups were carried through in the second focus groups. In October of their first year, students had developed an appreciation of what they liked and disliked in terms of the teaching and learning climate. By February, their views were expressed much more strongly. In general, both international and domestic students felt that the academic year was proceeding rather well. When asked to consider their Christmas examination results, domestic students claimed that they “got what they deserved” as a result of a lack of focus and minimal studying. International students also reported experiencing a decline in grades. However, although they attributed this decline to adjusting to a new country, culture and a foreign university community, they continued to maintain that first year university was repetitive and not intellectually challenging enough.

Good professors and good TAs continued to be of paramount importance. Professors who took the time to learn students’ names, prepare and deliver clear and informative lectures, create an interactive setting within the classroom, and communicate with students outside the classroom were considered “amazing.” Professors who were unprepared, not knowledgeable, not approachable and did not allow or stimulate class discussions were not appreciated. Students did not automatically attribute an inhospitable classroom climate to large classes. Rather, they described professors who could excel in any type of classroom. TAs were very much part of the formula for effective in- and out of classroom experiences.

Students recognized that faculty had multiple demands on their time. Professors who made time for students either by posting – and honouring – their office hours, or answering email or phone queries, were considered to be approachable and helpful. If students had negative experiences in trying to contact a faculty member, it was not likely that they would try again. The findings of this study support findings of Endo & Harpel (1982) and Pascarella (1980). However, our findings indicate that face-to-face contact is not necessarily the only effective or desirable form of contact. Shyness, language limitations and time constraints may lead students to seek other forms of contact with faculty. It may be useful for faculty members to survey their classes to

determine students' views about effective modes of contact. Results of such a survey could be used to discuss this issue with the class.

It was rather surprising that some many of the focus group participants – both domestic and international, female and male – did not consider themselves to be very proficient with computers and related computer activities. Although many students were exposed to some form of web based instruction, this exposure was hampered by inadequate skills (e.g., not knowing how to gain access to sites and information) and technological problems (e.g., problems with downloading course materials and becoming connected in wireless mode). Assumptions about computer literacy levels of students need to be investigated further.

Both domestic and international students were involved in extracurricular activities. Social and athletic clubs were the most popular forms of activities. Domestic students continued to describe their residence experiences and exposure to international students as very positive. However, international students did not necessarily share this view. From their perspective, Canadian students were described as “hi-bye” friends; that is, those students with whom greetings, but not much else, were exchanged. Seven months in to their first year of study, international students still considered Canadian customs and culture to be elusive. It is rather disconcerting that international students felt that, over the course of their academic year, their initial ambitions to socialize with Canadian students had been dampened to the point that they sought out the company of those from their own cultural backgrounds. It is equally problematic that domestic students seemed unaware of the social challenges faced by international students.

The housing lottery was a very hot issue for non-local students. In particular, international students were terrified with the prospect of being forced to live off campus. They felt that they had been deliberately misinformed about housing. For them, the housing lottery was a specific example of the general case of commitment – or lack thereof – by the university to the wellbeing of its students. In turn, commitment to continue their studies at UBC was waning.

International students' lack of success in passing the LPI also led to less than enthusiastic commitment on the part of these students. By this point in their studies, international students felt assaulted by this requirement. The monetary and psychological costs of repeatedly taking – and failing – the LPI was taking its toll. Students had a very clear message for UBC administration: “*get rid of the LPI!*” Conversely, domestic students were very committed to UBC and all planned to continue their studies at this university.

Regardless of levels of commitment, both domestic and international students agreed that *tu'um est* meant “it's up to you.” The interpretation “it's yours” did not resonate at all with them. However, complaints about teaching, services, and for international students levels of social integration could not be translated into a stronger role for the institution in ensuring success by students.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Many of the findings of this study are not new to those conducting research in this area. However, institutional administrators, student service professionals, especially those involved in first-year success programs and orientations, housing, academic advising, registrar's office and student organizations (e.g., AMS, GSS) could use these findings to enhance the experiences of domestic and international students attending UBC. Recommendations are organized to correspond with the temporal experiences of students. Although we use the international students' voices

primarily to frame the recommendations, we believe that both domestic and international students would benefit from our suggestions.

### ***BEFORE ARRIVAL AT UNIVERSITY***

International students indicated very clearly that more effort is required to ensure that incoming students can gain easy access to the information required for registration, course selection, housing and other campus services. Although those who were computer literate were able to negotiate the various web sites, students without strong computer skills struggled to find necessary information. Whereas domestic students could seek the assistance of their English speaking parents, teachers, counselors and friends, many international students felt isolated and frustrated in their efforts to seek out information. The following recommendations emerged from the focus groups.

- The first year student website should be re-designed to address housing and registration concerns for both domestic and international students. The site should be designed to be user-friendly with a one-stop approach for all first-year issues.
- Development of online tutorials for such procedures such as registration may be very useful for incoming students. An online program planner component could be one component of the tutorial.
- A 1-800 hotline and/or advisors who could be reached via MSN are needed to assist students with registration and other first year concerns. Some students indicated that they wanted to talk to a real person to confirm their registration, course selection and housing decisions. These services should be available at times when incoming students from other countries and provinces can gain access to them.
- Ongoing efforts should be made to continue to increase awareness of the services that UBC currently provides (e.g., website, welcome package, visits to large first-year classes, information sessions).
- The *International Student Guide Book* should be revisited to ensure it incorporates issues raised by international students (e.g., early housing application, registration).
- Funding opportunities – or lack thereof – should be made perfectly clear to incoming students. Eligibility criteria for funding, the application process and evaluation criteria should be demystified. In addition, efforts should be made to raise the awareness of available academic merit versus need-based scholarships. Scholarship application tutorials may be a useful service to provide for students.

In other words, students need easy access to information that will lead to a seamless, surprise-free transition to university.

## *THE INITIAL TRANSITION TO UNIVERSITY*

Domestic students were very appreciative of the efforts made by residence advisors in ensuring that students were introduced to each other and in coordinating activities. Residence appears to be the locus of social integration for students. However, orientation events, such as MUG and the Peer Program offered through International House, received mixed or lukewarm reviews.

- Residence advisors should appreciate the specific needs of and difficulties faced by international students. Ongoing efforts to ensure their inclusion and to foster cross-cultural integration should be made. Training, which should occur over the entire year, focus on helping peer advisors to be effective in their roles. Events should be organized to socialize international students to Canadian culture and Canadian students to other cultures.
- The visibility of front-line staff who are trained to deal with first-year concerns (e.g., knowledgeable about resources on campus to assist students) should be increased.
- Domestic peers should be strongly encouraged to adopt this role very seriously. International students who made early contact with their peers were much more likely to praise the Peer Program.
- A careful evaluation of the MUG program needs to be carried out to determine whether comments by focus group participants hold within the first year student community.

Within a few weeks of experiencing UBC, international and domestic students were keenly aware of good, and not so good, teaching and learning experiences. These impressions carried through to the second term. Four key elements of good instructions emerged from the focus groups: engaging instructors who demonstrated that they care about their students; thoughtful distribution of class materials (including the effective use of WebCT and other web based resources); TAs who were encouraging, helpful, knowledgeable and kind; and effective ways for students to contact instructors and TAs outside of the classroom. International students were particularly sensitive to negative remarks from and challenges in contacting instructors. We offer the following recommendations to improve teaching and learning which are in line with the dimensions of Tinto's (1987) Model of Institutional Departure:

- Faculty members and teaching assistants need to be reminded of the impact they have on first year (and other) students. Practices such as learning students' names, answering students' questions and meeting with students during office hours should not be underestimated.
- The importance of good instruction needs to be reinforced continually at the departmental and faculty level. All efforts by TAG to improve the teaching and learning at UBC should be encouraged. The anticipated spate of faculty retirements should be used as an opportunity to sensitize new faculty to the importance of good teaching.

- Faculty should be encouraged to incorporate group work into their classes to promote interaction among those living in residence and commuting students and to foster English language competency by those who need to improve these skills.
- Departments should evaluate the effectiveness of online resources such as WebCT in relation to the ability of students to use them.
- Departments should ensure that teaching assistants are knowledgeable and well trained to perform their roles.

While these recommendations sound obvious, our findings signal an ongoing need to improve the teaching and learning environment – in some ways, at the most basic level.

### ***RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ONGOING IMPROVEMENT OF THE FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCE***

The findings of these focus groups suggest that complex retention models such as the one advanced by Benjamin (1994) and Benjamin and Hollings (1995) correspond with the multifaceted dimensions of student life described by first year students. In these models, the student experience is conceptualized by acknowledging and incorporating individual, institutional, and extra-institutional dimensions. According to Benjamin (1994) the quality of student life involves the following eight components: “satisfaction, happiness, multiple life domains, short-term past, objective circumstances, institutional circumstances, psychosocial factors, and meaning structures” (p.228). One of these components – multiple life domains – includes sub-components such as social, finances, individual, living arrangements, academic, university services, gender, and university administration.

Information generated from the focus groups confirm that it is important to consider the multiple contexts within which students operate and to keep in mind the individuals, environments, and situations when attempting to understand and improve students’ experiences. The following recommendations touch on several of the components and contexts highlighted in Benjamin’s model:

- Those students living off-campus commented that they felt socially isolated. Efforts could be made to provide social events that are less tied to residences by, for example, inviting off-campus students and creating opportunities to socialize. These events could be held within academic departments and as first year events.
- Faculty members should be encouraged to promote dialogue and group work among students during class time.
- Student service providers within International House and First Year Experience office need to increase their efforts to coordinate services that would provide opportunities for international students and domestic students to socialize and build relationships throughout the academic year. Such events could be held at various locations around campus to familiarize students with campus and not “label” events solely for international and/or domestic students. Residence activities to enhance friendship

formation among different cultural groups could result in better social integration by international students.

- Some international students expressed concern that International House seemed to cater more to Asian students' needs. More could be done to change this image of International house and to increase service provision to all international students. Also increasing awareness about Canadian culture – and particularly BC culture – would also be part of this reciprocal learning relationship.
- An exploration of LPI standards and its implications and relevance to international student performance is needed. The amount of anguish provoked by this test should be taken very seriously in relation to the intended outcomes of this test.
- The housing lottery, along with the LPI, caused the most anxiety and anger among international students. Students need reassurance that their assumptions about on-campus housing – that is, its ongoing availability – are accurate. That international students cannot be employed off campus must be taken into consideration when determining housing policy.
- Opportunities for international students to practice and improve their English (e.g., promotion of currently available conversation partner programs and language tutorials) would be very welcome.
- Attention to the nature and availability of food on campus and particularly in residences where meal plans are required would improve the wellbeing of those living on campus. Food Services should take into account the cultural diversity of UBC's students when designing meal programs. The availability of cooking facilities in residences would provide a partial solution to students' concerns about residence food.
- Health promotion should be a focus of the first year experience. Healthy food, access to sports facilities at no or a reasonable cost, and efforts to create a healthy academic and social environment would enhance students' experiences considerably.

## CONCLUSION

We may indeed never get the first year experience right. However, this report is replete with suggestions for improvement that, with varying degrees of effort, would enhance every aspect of the experience for both international and domestic students.

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