

Ford School Focus Group: International Graduate Students

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Summary of the Process

Mary Wright (CRLT) and Yaomin Wen (Ford School second-year graduate student) conducted two 90-minute focus groups with international Ford School graduate students. Yaomin invited all international graduate students who spoke English as a second language. There were 17 participants:

- On March 13, we met with 9 second-year students. (One second-year graduate student attended the following day.)
- On March 14, we met with 7 first-year students.

Focus group questions primarily addressed students' perception of their own participation in Ford School classes, as well as perceived barriers and supports to that participation. (See attached protocol.) Students were given the opportunity to raise any other salient issues, and these also are noted in the report that follows. The focus groups were not tape-recorded, but both Yaomin and Mary took careful notes.

Key Themes Raised in the Focus Groups

- 1. Students' primarily understand Ford School professors' expectations of "participation" as frequent verbal contributions to the class.**
 - Other understandings of an active participant included a student who attends class, listens carefully, makes respectful comments, and provides relevant, evidence-based contributions.
- 2. Nearly all students did not see themselves as active participants, according to this definition.** However, some students thought that they were more active in some classes than others, depending on course content and how instructors structured class discussions. Several first-year students reported that they deliberately chose second-term classes that they knew would not require extensive verbal discussions.

- 3. Nearly all participants noted that there were significant cultural differences in pedagogical expectations between the classrooms in the Ford School and their home countries.** Examples of these differences include:
- A university background where students were never asked to participate in a discussion or work in groups
 - A university background where it was perceived that a higher degree of relevance and thoughtfulness was required of student participants
 - A perception that U.S. professors have discussions “just for the sake of discussions” while professors in other countries seek to build consensus or determine the right answer. This affects differential rates of participation because, as one respondent noted, “U.S. students find it much easier to participate in discussion for the sake of discussion.”
- 4. Although participants thought highly of Ford School professors, they also felt that there were some classroom practices that exacerbated cultural differences and language barriers.** (Unless otherwise noted, these themes arose in both focus groups.)
- It is difficult for students to follow the fast pace of a typical discussion.
“Sometimes I think I have something to say, but the topic changes too fast.”
 (second-year student)
 - *“Most of the time I ask myself, ‘What did I get from the class?’”* (second-year student)
 - *“Sometimes I think I have thoughts I want to express but I need time to organize my language.”* (first-year student)
 - Professors’ and students’ use of abbreviations, student slang and cultural references inhibit listening comprehension.
“I started out the class being active, but I stopped when we started talking about certain people in Congress.” (second-year student)
 - It is difficult for students to have enough time to carefully read through assigned course materials and to get the main argument of a reading, which makes the student feel like s/he has less to contribute to a discussion.
“It’s difficult to skim. I need more time to read.” (first-year student)
 - First-year students mentioned that there is a lack of understanding about how instructors grade participation.
“Nobody knows how faculty grade.” (first-year student)

- There was some disagreement about the use of small groups.
 - Second-year students felt that in small groups, especially those with more than three students, international students can be marginalized and the discussion can be even harder to follow because of its more informal nature. *“In a group of 4-5, I have to ‘fight for a place’.”*
 - First-year students had a mixed viewpoint about small groups. A few students thought they were a more comfortable environment for participation: *“When I talk to a small group, they usually wait for me in a patient way.”* Some others felt like the pace of discussion was even more accelerated and they felt badly about having other students wait.

5. Participants also reported that many instructors used classroom strategies that encouraged their participation. (Unless otherwise noted, these themes arose in both focus groups.)

- Direct solicitation of international students’ participation
“What do international students think?” gives us a chance to speak out. I prefer direct questions from professors.” (first-year student)
- Verbal contributions of the instructor that include slower speech, a summary of the main points of a discussion as it progresses, and rephrasing or explaining student comments that use slang, abbreviations or specific cultural references
- Advance guidelines, questions, or PowerPoint slides that highlight the main point that students should get out of a reading and the key points that will frame a discussion. Summaries of key points at the end of class also are useful, so students can follow-up on what they might have missed.
- Specific strategies that came up only in the second-year group included:
 - Limit the size of groups and have students take on specific roles in each group (e.g., one student is the notetaker, one student is the discussion facilitator, one student plays the devil’s advocate, etc.), from which students can choose.
 - Use a short (non-graded) writing exercises before asking students to respond verbally.
 - Feel free to give honest, substantive feedback to international students about their comments.
- Specific strategies that arose only in the first-year group were:
 - After or outside of class, ask international students about how the class is going.
 - Additionally, visiting office hours is useful, and students appreciated instructors who would schedule a meeting if there was a time conflict with regularly scheduled office hours.

- Clarify how participation is graded. Some students thought that international students should be offered options to verbal participation (e.g., written responses).
- Utilize online discussions as part of classroom discussions and participation grades, because this can be a more comfortable format in which to contribute.

6. Other issues not related to participation that emerged in the discussion:

- Writing tutors are excellent, but it is difficult to make an appointment with them.
 - Participants suggested that the tutors also could offer electronic appointments, where feedback is offered via email.
- The second-year group indicated that an international student orientation for Ford School students would be welcome and help clarify some issues for students (e.g., What are office hours? Why is it important for students to go to them? What are expectations for writing memos?). When asked directly to comment on this idea, the first-year group thought that a separate orientation would further differentiate the international students.
- Specific suggestions that arose only in the first-year group were:
 - In-class exams place international students at a disadvantage. Students suggested that a separate, longer exam time be scheduled.
 - International students should be allowed to bring language dictionaries into exams.
- Specific suggestions that arose only in the second-year group were:
 - A buddy system would be useful, which would assign both U.S. and international experienced student mentors to a new student.
 - Designate someone in student services who can be the “point person” for international graduate students. This person should meet individually with each international graduate student once per term.
 - Have regular focus groups where international graduate students can discuss their experiences (such as this one).