

A Survey of Gillings School of Global Public Health International Students and Alumni – 2006 to 2016

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A. Introduction

In spring 2016, the [Gillings Global Gateway®](#) initiated the “International Student Satisfaction and Needs Assessment Survey.” This was part of the larger commitment by Gillings to enhance the learning environment for every student, particularly the international student.

The purpose of this inaugural survey was to gather feedback from current international students and alumni who had graduated between 2006 and 2016 about their experience at Gillings. Thematic areas in the survey include sections on 1) the student’s arrival experience and welcome to UNC, 2) the academic life and learning environment they encountered at Gillings, and 3) the student’s satisfaction with various UNC student support services.

This report presents a brief analysis of data collected, both quantitative and qualitative. Each section leads with quantitative findings, followed by comments representative of themes observed in the qualitative data. Finally, the report offers recommendations and suggestions the school might consider in order to enhance the international student’s learning environment, based on an analysis of survey findings.

B. Methodology

The 37 item survey instrument was conceived of and designed by the The Gillings Global Gateway® with input from the UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health [Office of Students Affairs \(OSA\)](#), [Office for Advancement](#), [Office of Strategic Analysis and Business Intelligence](#), and the UNC Global [International Student and Scholar Services \(ISSS\)](#). In addition, consultation was sought from survey methodology experts at the [UNC Odum Institute](#) about how best to use [Qualtrics survey software to implement the instrument](#). Students and faculty members (8 total) with global work experience pre-tested the survey instrument in several iterations before it was launched on May 16, 2016. During pre-testing, it took about 10 minutes to complete the quantitative sections. The survey instrument was reviewed by the UNC Office of Human Research Ethics, which

determined that it does not constitute human subjects research and, therefore, does not require institutional review board (IRB) approval (UNC IRB Study Number 16-0617).

A convenience sample of 520 email contacts were obtained from Gillings' records for international students and alumni who attended Gillings between 2006 and 2016. A cover letter introduced the purpose of the survey and invited recipients to participate, emphasizing that responses would be anonymous. As an incentive to participate, recipients were invited, after completing the survey, to enter their name into a random drawing for a UNC Gillings "Swag Bag" of gifts, including a notebook, pen, luggage tag, and lapel pin, and be registered into "[UNC WellConnected](#)," an online community for Gillings alumni.

An email notification reminder, in form of a personalized note from the Gillings Global Gateway[®] Executive Director, was sent weekly to those recipients who had not yet opened the email invitation or completed the survey. This boosted the response rate by about 10% each week. The survey closed on June 14, 2006.

Of the 520 emails in the convenience sample, 517 were successfully sent, with three email addresses returned as invalid and four additional emails were found to be duplicates, yielding a study sample size of 513. Of this denominator, 286 individuals opened the email invitation, yielding a 56% contact rate,¹ 238 started the survey and, of these, 187 completed the survey. Based on definitions published by the American Association of Public Opinion Research [1], this study yielded a 36% (187/513) completion rate² and a 65% (187/286) cooperation rate³.

The quantitative data questions used a four-point Likert-like scale where 4=very satisfied/agree and 1=very dissatisfied/disagree. Analysis of the qualitative data follows the phenomenological approach to "use an emergent strategy, to allow the method of analysis to follow the nature of the data itself"[2]. This approach has been employed elsewhere in similar analyses of international students' shared experience [3].

Selected survey results are presented below in section C, including number of respondents for each question, range of responses, 95% confidence interval, and relevant qualitative comments from respondents. Recommendations and suggestions are offered, where appropriate.

C. Results & Recommendations

1. Respondent status and graduation year

The number of respondents were almost evenly split between alumni members (49%) and current students (51%) (Figure 1).

¹ "Contact rate" is the proportion of all cases in which a member was reached.

² "Completion rate" is the number of complete interviews with reporting units divided by the number of eligible reporting units in the sample.

³ "Cooperation rate" is the proportion of all cases interviewed of all eligible units ever contacted.

A total of 88 respondents identified their year of graduation, the majority within the last three years (2014-2016) (Figure 2).

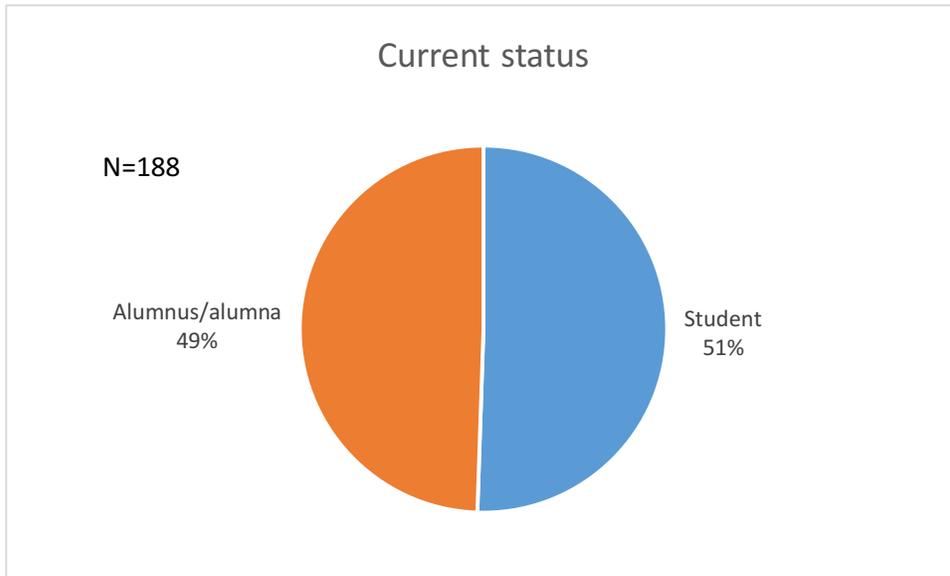


Figure 1: Current Status (N=188)

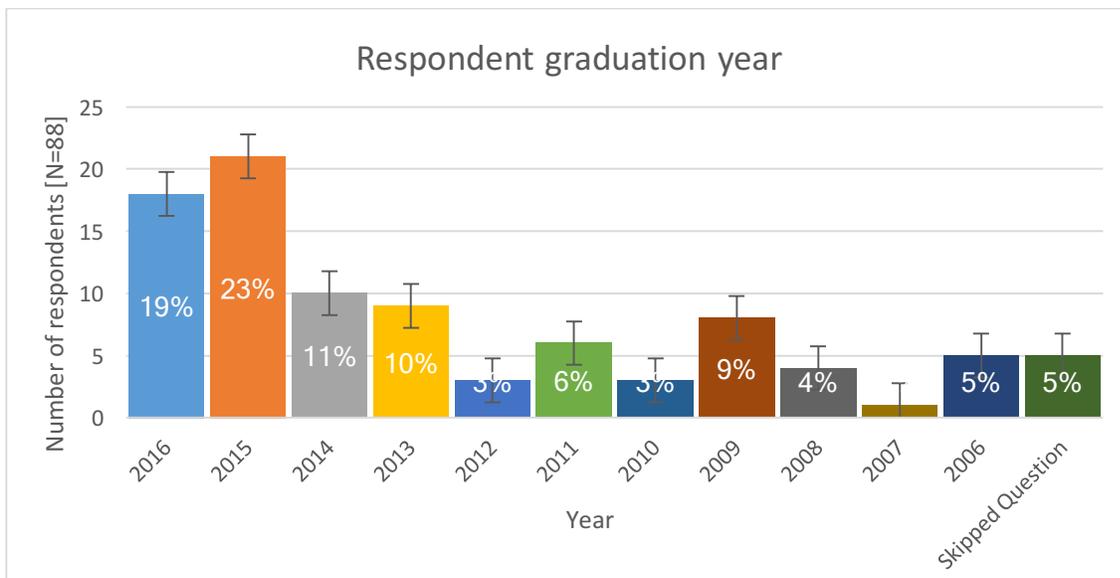


Figure 2: Respondent graduation year (N=88)

2. Top three reasons for choosing UNC Chapel Hill

In this part of the survey, students and alumni were invited to select their top three reasons for choosing to study at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (Figure 3). Overall, 187

students and alumni members completed this question. Of those, 98% selected academic quality as the top reason they chose to study at UNC, followed by research opportunities (61%), and job prospects after graduating (39%).

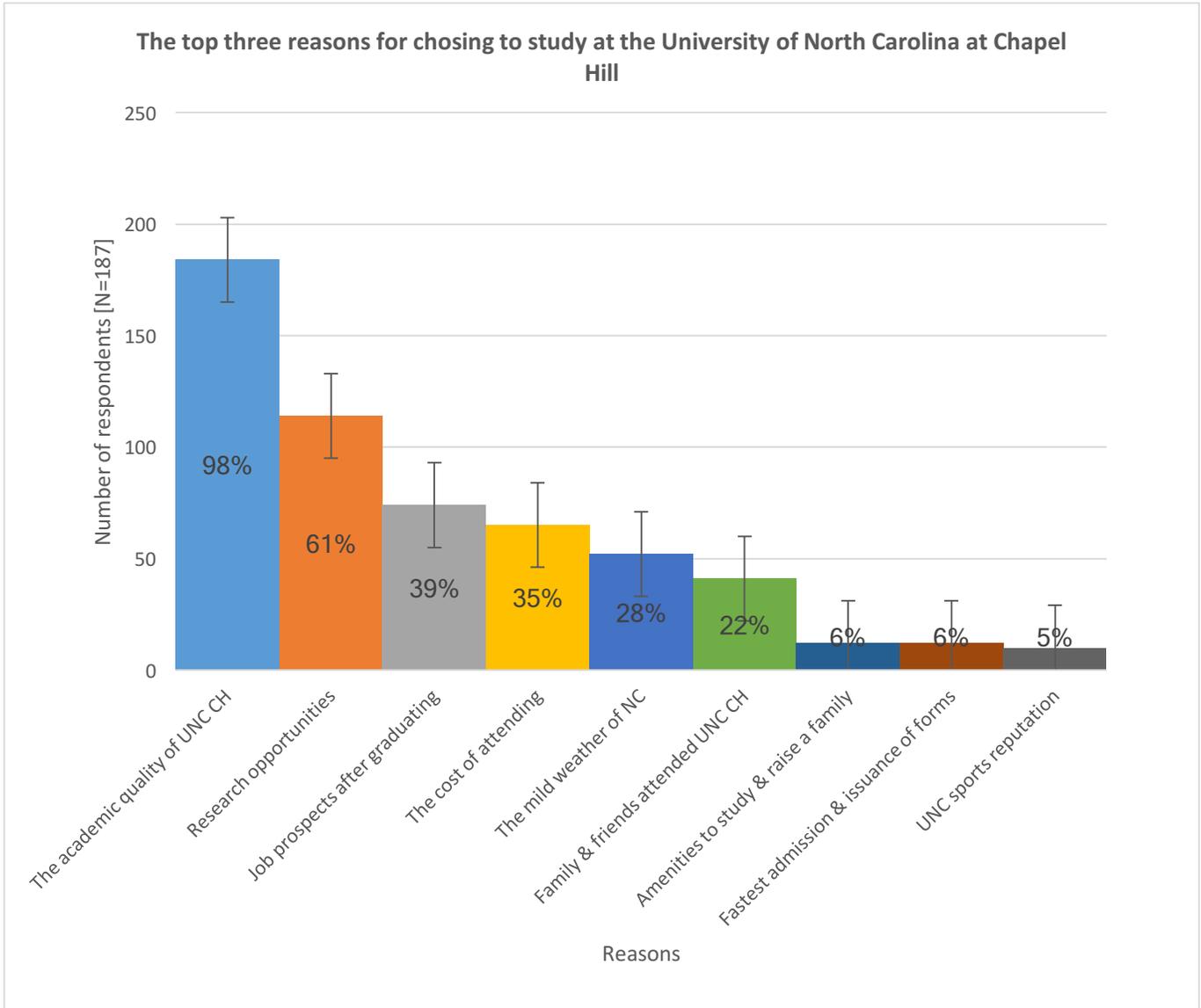


Figure 3: Top three reasons of choosing UNC Chapel Hill (N=187)

Summary of relevant quotes:

“Primary reason: Gillings is the best public university of public health in US.”

“Besides academic quality, I was offered a Fellowship which made a big difference in the decision to come to UNC.”

“The flexibility of the DrPH course on Health Leadership while continuing to work from my home country and ranking of the Gillings School of Public Health at second best in the U.S. appealed to me in applying for the program. Also I am interested in developing long term leadership opportunities for health professionals in my country and felt that this will give me the opportunity to continue to do my work and also achieve that objective in the long term.”

3. Arrival and welcome satisfaction

As shown in Figure 3, the majority of respondents were satisfied with the welcoming activities. Welcome and pick-up from the airport had the highest satisfaction rating, an average of 3.5, with 94% of those who were picked up from the airport being either very satisfied or satisfied. However, it is important to note that 26% (55) of the respondents indicated their program/department did not have a welcome and airport pick-up program. The Gillings School of Global Public Health diversity orientation received an average satisfaction score of 3.2. This was the lowest satisfaction rating of the 153 respondents who attended the orientation, even though it is well above average. It should be noted that the percent of those who did not attend the welcome activities ranged from 7.1% for the departmental/program orientation to 29% for the Gillings diversity orientation.

A total of 143 respondents answered the question about the welcome document *“Survive and Thrive: A guide for incoming public health students from around the world”* <https://sph.unc.edu/files/2013/08/International-Guide-May-2016.pdf>, which was rolled out in August 2014 (respondents who graduated before 2014 or did not indicate their graduation date were excluded from the analysis). Of 143 respondents, 80 or 56% did not receive the guide, while 44% indicated they had received the guide. In the group who said they had received the guide, 94% were either very satisfied or satisfied with the guide, while 6% were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied (Figure 4).

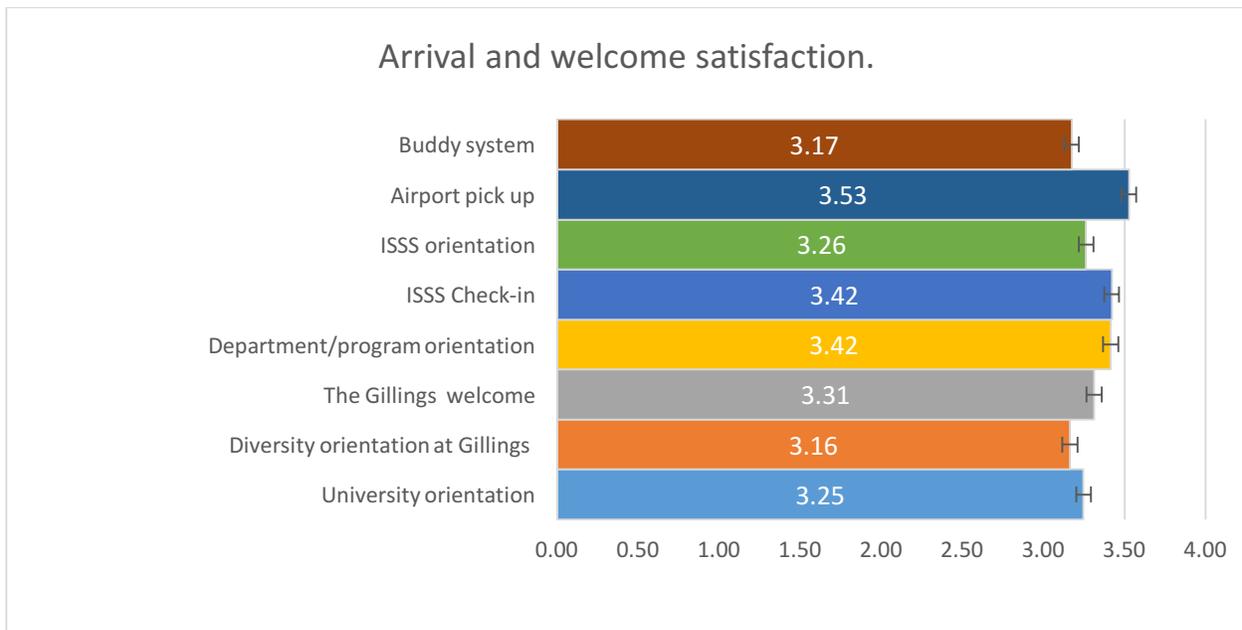


Figure 4: Arrival and welcome (N=210)

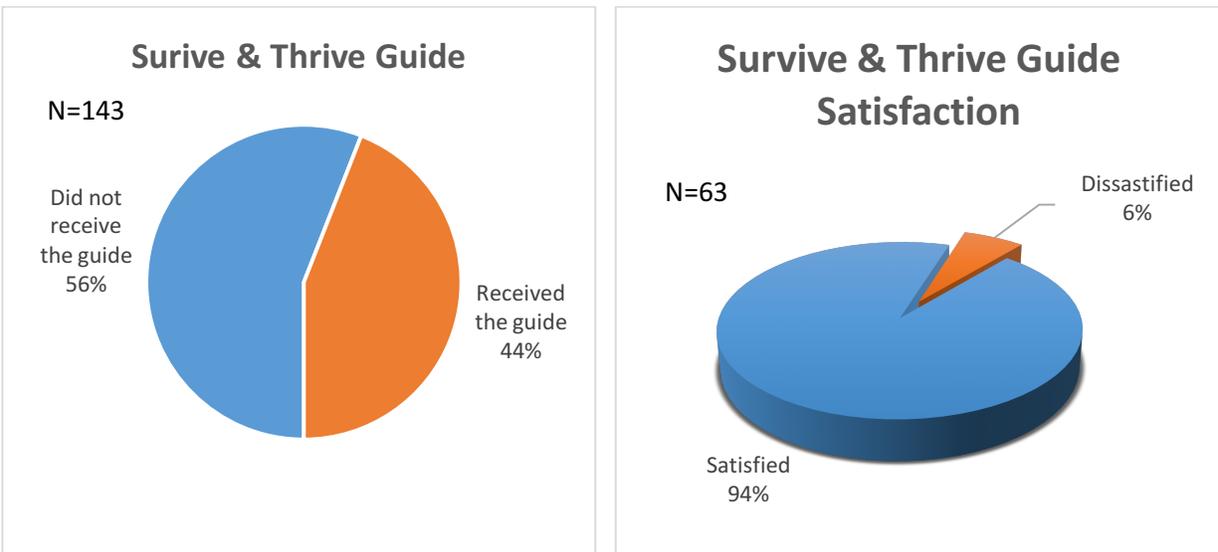


Figure 5: Survive and Thrive Guide (N=143)

Summary of relevant quotes:

“I was a student in 2008-2009 and had a great experience. I was extremely happy with the school and the staff. Very professional and very welcoming.”

“Arrival and welcome was part of my Rotary Peace Fellowship. My department offered excellent support.”

“When I first came to school in 2011, there was no resources for getting housing/renting or at least I did not know where to find them. I only attended the grad school and the department orientation, and there were some guides for new students handed during the orientation.”

Recommendations:

- ✓ Possibly standardize the arrival and welcoming services offered to international students across the departments and program and make this information known during recruitment, i.e., airport pickup is offered and a buddy system is in place. Offering these benefits in all 8 departments/program would further increase Gillings’ reputation as being “global friendly.”
- ✓ Publicize the arrival and welcome services to the international students early on. It emerged from the qualitative data that most students and former students were not aware of the services. In addition, the departments can learn from those that have received glowing reviews from students or former students such as those in ESE and the Duke-UNC Rotary Center program.

- ✓ Ensure the “Survive and Thrive” students guide is made available to every incoming international student as part of their information welcome packet, given 94% of those who received it were either very satisfied or satisfied. Currently, this 67-page document is only available online and it is not certain that every international student receives it.
- ✓ Consider incorporating aspects of the University/Graduate school orientation at the school or department level. It emerged from the comments that students would prefer more customized information that pertains to them as international students at Gillings School of Global Public Health. For example, the following comment captured this suggestion well, *“It would have been better if there is special event for welcoming international student in each department or school. The welcoming event provided by OISS only covers administrative issues and is a too broad forums, i.e., too many students attend the event. If the department or school also gives welcoming event for international students it will be better since each department may have its unique environment or different experiences with international students.”*
- ✓ Consider reviewing the School’s diversity orientation to make it more attractive and effective for international students.

4. Academic and learning environment

In this section respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction with the academic and learning environment at Gillings, such as the quality of teaching, accessibility of their academic advisor, use of technology use in classrooms, among other items (Figures 5 and 6). Of 206 respondents, 95% were either very satisfied or satisfied with the quality of teaching in their department/program, 96% were very satisfied or satisfied with their classroom/laboratory facilities, and 83% were either very satisfied or satisfied with multicultural/diversity perspectives included in class. Over 80% expressed strong satisfaction on the extent to which faculty included global perspectives in their class presentations, assignments, or discussions. Of 204 respondents, the vast majority were satisfied with the learning environment, including 97% on the use of technology in classroom, 96% on the availability of open meeting spaces across the School, 93% on the availability of courses to make progress towards a degree, 92% on the availability of the academic advisor, and 81% on the opportunity to participate in a UNC Chapel Hill approved internship or research/teaching assistant experience.

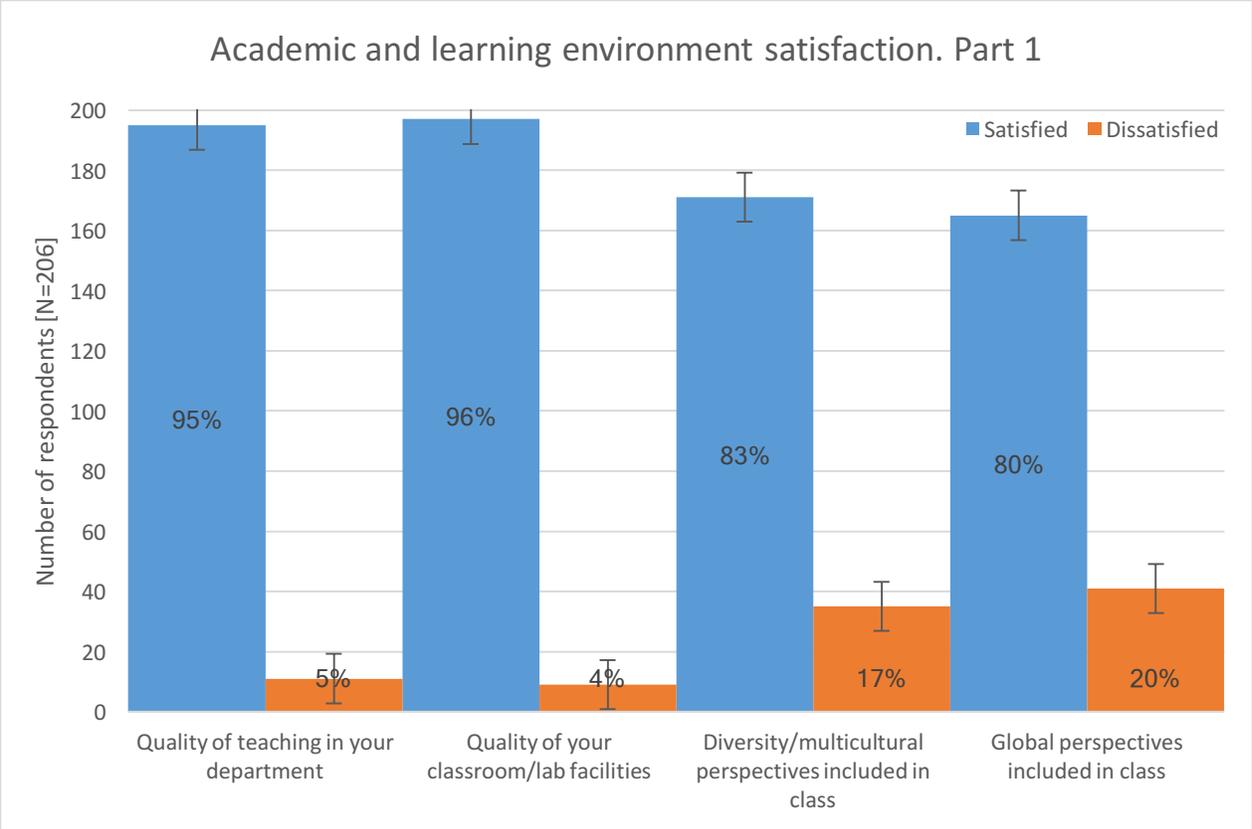


Figure 6: Academic and learning environment satisfaction, Part 1 (N=206)

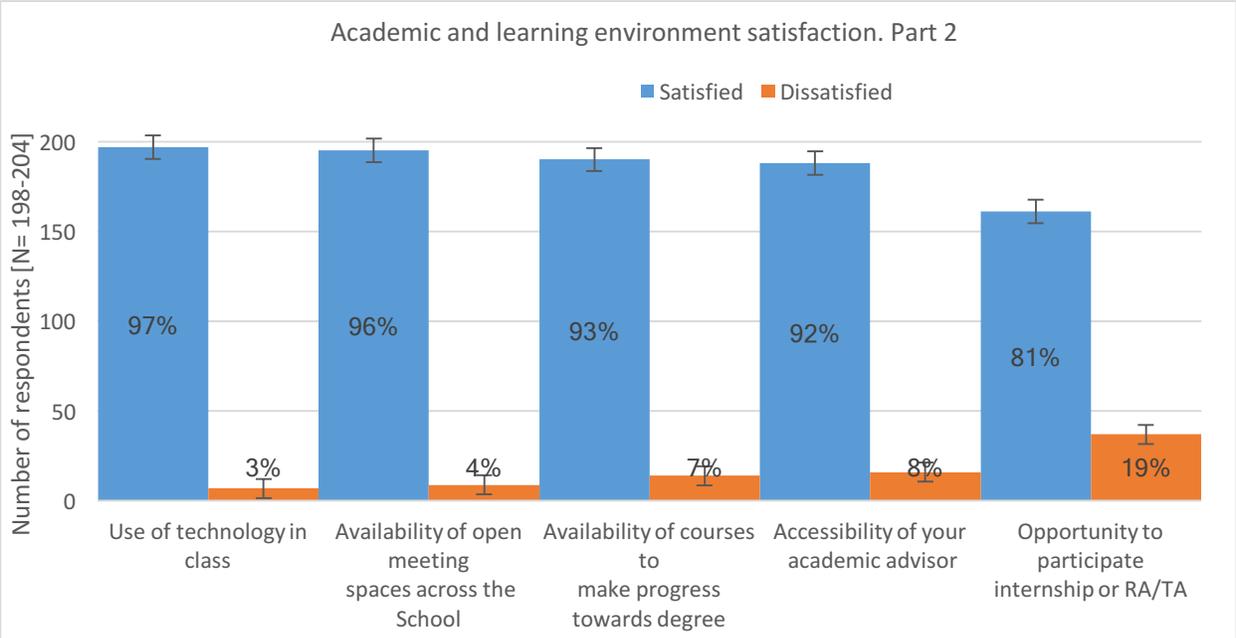


Figure 7: Academic and learning environment satisfaction. Part 2 (N=204)

Summary of relevant quotes:

“So far the academic experience has been great with great faculty members that are very knowledgeable on the subject matters. I have also enjoyed the interaction with my class mates which has further widened by horizon on the various public health issues in the US.”

“I think the challenge is not in the quality of the courses or instructors, as they are truly knowledgeable and experienced. A few times I had misunderstandings with TA's or instructors due to the use of certain expressions that I translated to English, but which had a different connotation or didn't have an equivalent. I think instructors and TAs could benefit from learning about cultural sensitivity, which is not only respecting other customs but also understanding the challenges around the use of language (when it is not your native language)”.

“Classes outside home department are extremely difficult to register in because of class caps and priority to home dept students, even if one really needs to use the skills in their specific area of work. I had to pay to attend a workshop outside school for a course that I could not get enrolled in yet I needed the skills to write my dissertation.”

Recommendations:

- ✓ Make it easy to register across departments, especially in identifying global courses with global content. Several respondents mentioned in their comments the challenge in registering across departments and that it was even harder to find global public health classes across the School. Further, students should be made aware of the opportunities for taking classes in the other UNC Schools, and at NC State and Duke University. It seems some respondents didn't know about these opportunities. It is also important to address challenges students face in taking classes outside the School to meet their degree requirements. For example, if a student is having difficulty in registering for classes at the UNC School of Business, they should know they can seek guidance from their departmental student service manager, if the student's academic advisor is unable to assist or doesn't know the process for registering for classes outside the School. Clearly (perhaps repeatedly) communicating this information to international students would be helpful in addressing these challenges.
- ✓ Encourage cultural competency among faculty, staff, and students, both international and domestic a-like. This has a direct impact on an international student's academic success and has the potential for fostering a more inclusive environment that acknowledges different “life experiences,” from what one would typically experience in North Carolina, and the validity for the student's expression of such experiences in class. Departments and the School in general should explore opportunities to make the School's values on diversity and inclusion more visible and celebrated. One such suggestion came in form of the following comment: *“It would be great if the school have some multi-cultural events to acknowledge the diversity of students across the school.”* Another stated *“Again, the lack of diversity and the U.S.-centric atmosphere in the classroom is very obvious. Unless the 'diversity vocabulary' is integrated into the curriculum throughout the course, the one or two classes that are 'devoted' to learning about a minority author/ another country/ a different gender identity will very much feel like a 'token' class- put into the curriculum to check a box.”*

- ✓ Formalize RA/TA appointments for all students, including international students. Several respondents mentioned how important it was for them to have the opportunity to practice teaching or having a hands-on experience in a research project. However, they noted the restriction of working outside campus, and faced difficulties in landing such position on campus. This theme was echoed by some and was captured by the following comment: *“RA seeking process can be tough. Some professors won't even reply emails, others simply reply that they don't have RA positions currently. I would appreciate if they schedule a meet with me then decide. But I can understand professors are busy”*

5. Student Support Services

In this section, respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction on 14 key student support services, including the Health Sciences Library, Campus Health Services, International Students and Scholar Services (ISSS), The Graduate School, the Learning Center, Carolina Students Legal Services, and Counselling & Psychological Services, among others. The results indicate that, for those who reported using a service, the vast majority were very satisfied/satisfied, including 98% with the Health Sciences Library, 96% with the Campus Health Services, and 95 % with the Gillings Global Gateway[®] (which was launched in 2015), 92% with the International Student and Scholar Services, and 87% with the Writing Center. It is important to note that some services, such as Counselling & Psychological Services, Carolina Students Legal Services, and the Learning Center had a low frequency of students reporting using these services. For example, 81% of respondents never used the UNC Counselling & Psychological Service, which may be an indication they did not know about this service (see comment below) or had no need for its services (Figure 7).

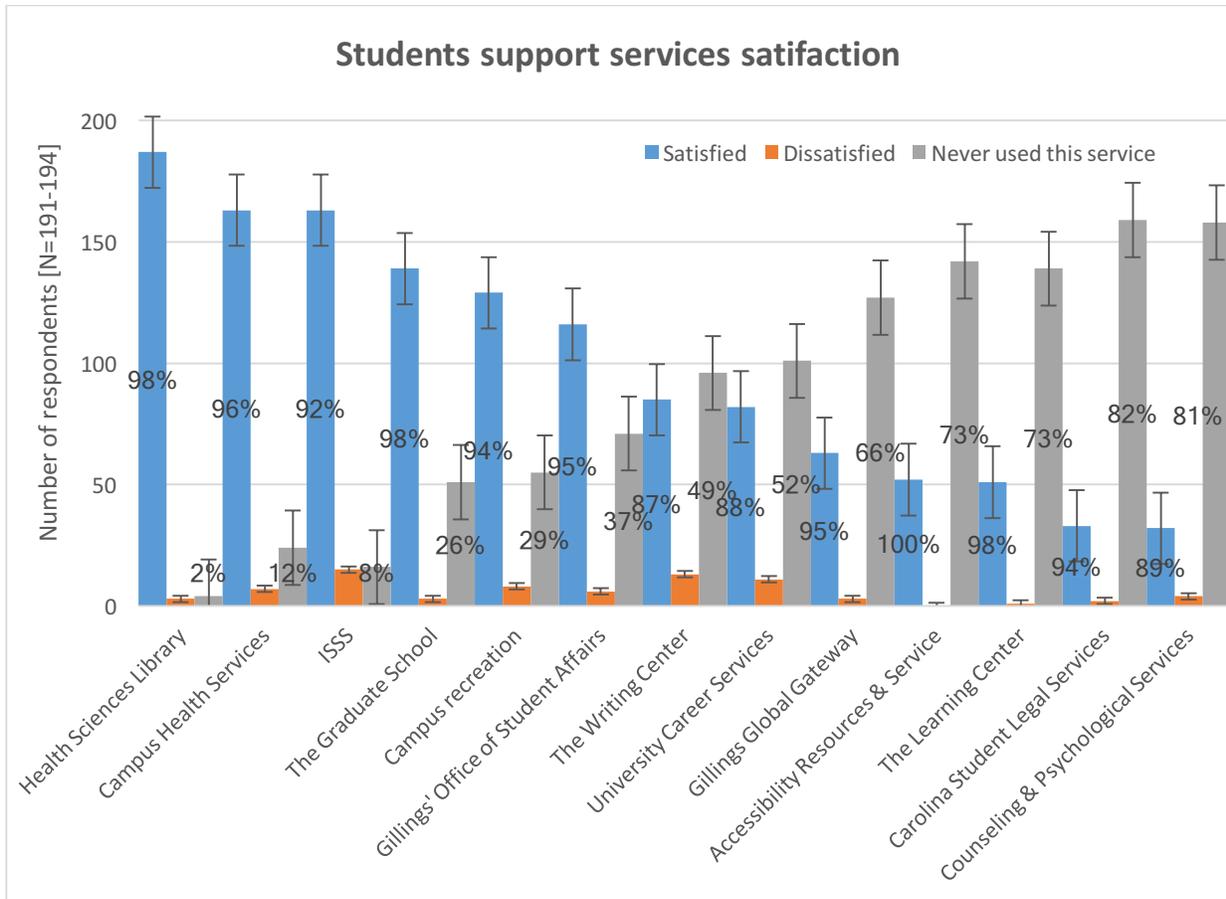


Figure 8: Students support services satisfaction (N=191-194)

Summary of relevant quotes:

“The writing groups at the writing center were very helpful, kudos to their group! The graduate school workshops were also helpful.”

“I wish I knew of the availability of some of these resources. I am hearing of them now - 9 years after stepping into UNC Chapel Hill.”

“I found a lot of help through the Institute for the Study of the Americas. My department is terrible in understanding the needs of international students. I had to pay summers every year, and my scholarship did not cover those. They finally removed the requirement of us paying summer credits, but for me was a huge economic burden. I have had to work many hours outside my regular coursework to supplement these costs.”

“Writing Center was NEVER available to grad students unless from Non English Speaking Background.”

Recommendations:

- ✓ Consider creating an online support services resource guide for all students, with a special section or emphasis for international students and online students. It emerged that some

students are not aware of the resources but also that some of the support resources are traditionally designed only for on-campus students.

6. Personal concerns or worries

In this section, students and alumni were asked to indicate their agreement with a list of personal “concerns and worries.” Between 189 and 191 respondents completed items in this section (Figure 8). Of those, 70% agreed or somewhat agreed that securing a job in the U.S after graduation was a concern or worry, while only 37% felt securing a job in their home country was a major concern or worry. Other leading concerns or worries included understanding their U.S tax obligation (68%), having adequate financial support (68%), understanding US medical insurance and services (66%), finding on-campus employment (61%), and finding satisfactory housing (54%).

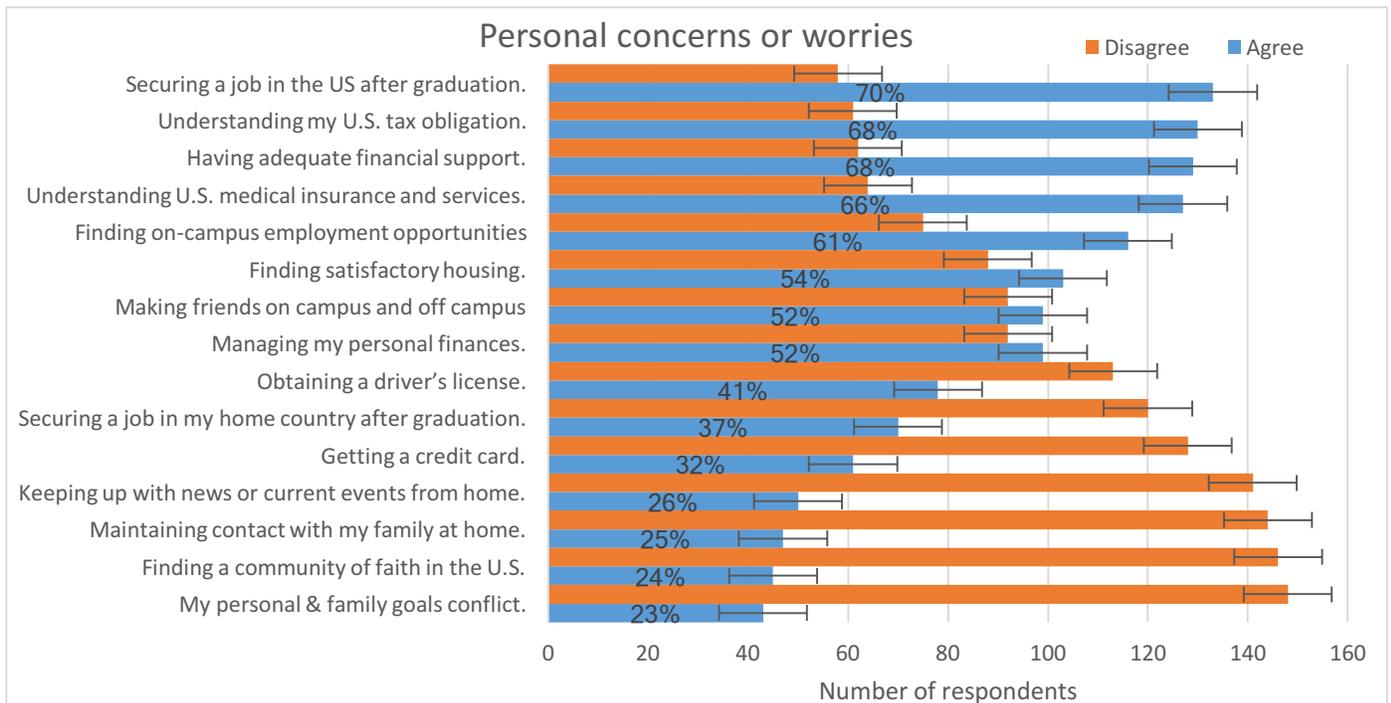


Figure 9: Personal concerns or worries (N=189-191)

Summary of relevant quotes:

“I have concerns that there are international students are not eligible for so many of the available scholarship programs in the UNC system. To truly develop a Global School as proposed by the school, deliberate effort should be made to recruit students from outside the US and also provide enabling environment through financial support to thrive. The disparity between in-state and out of state fees is significant and closing this gap especially for international students through additional scholarship support for those with significant prospects will be very helpful.”

“I had constant fear that I would not complete my program because of financial difficulties. I was never certain I could get on-campus employment but my department always got something for me -- I am extremely grateful. The worries and uncertainties about the opportunities made school stressful sometimes. Generally, I think that language (and accent)

and cultural differences make international students less competitive especially for teaching assistant-ships. Course-taking students are also less likely to consult with TAs who are international students.”

“The health insurance was difficult to understand and no concession was given to international students especially those that had limited funding for studies. It was difficult to understand my tax obligations.”

Recommendations:

A couple of themes emerged under this sections included funding, understanding tax obligations and finding a job after graduation. As noted earlier, several commenters mentioned how difficult it is finding a RA/TA position and how funding uncertainty is stressful and can put a student in jeopardy of not completing their academic program for lack of student work-study opportunities at UNC.

- ✓ Educate prospective students on their financial obligation before embarking on the program while making them aware of the realistic possibility of funding.
- ✓ Explore the possibility of conducting tax seminars for Gillings international students with experts from UNC Law School, who usually volunteer during the tax season.
- ✓ Provide information on employment and career opportunities that is suitable for international students. Some of these are provided by the Gillings Global Gateway but students across the School might not be aware of the resource.

7. Academic concerns/challenges

In this section, the aim was to understand the international student’s academic concerns or challenges. A total of 189 respondents answered the questions in this area (Figure 9). The vast majority of the respondents did not have academic concerns or challenges in studying at the Gillings School of Global Public Health. However, it is important to highlight that 46% of respondents did find it challenging in relating to American students in classes. A total of 83 students (44%) said it was a challenge participating in academic discussions, while 40% said it was a concern in keeping up with reading assignments. By contrast, understanding degree requirements and relating to other international students in classes were the least challenging aspects reported by respondents, at 13% and 17%, respectively. These results are also reflected in the qualitative data, where isolation and language/writing skills emerged as major themes of an international student’s concerns/challenges.

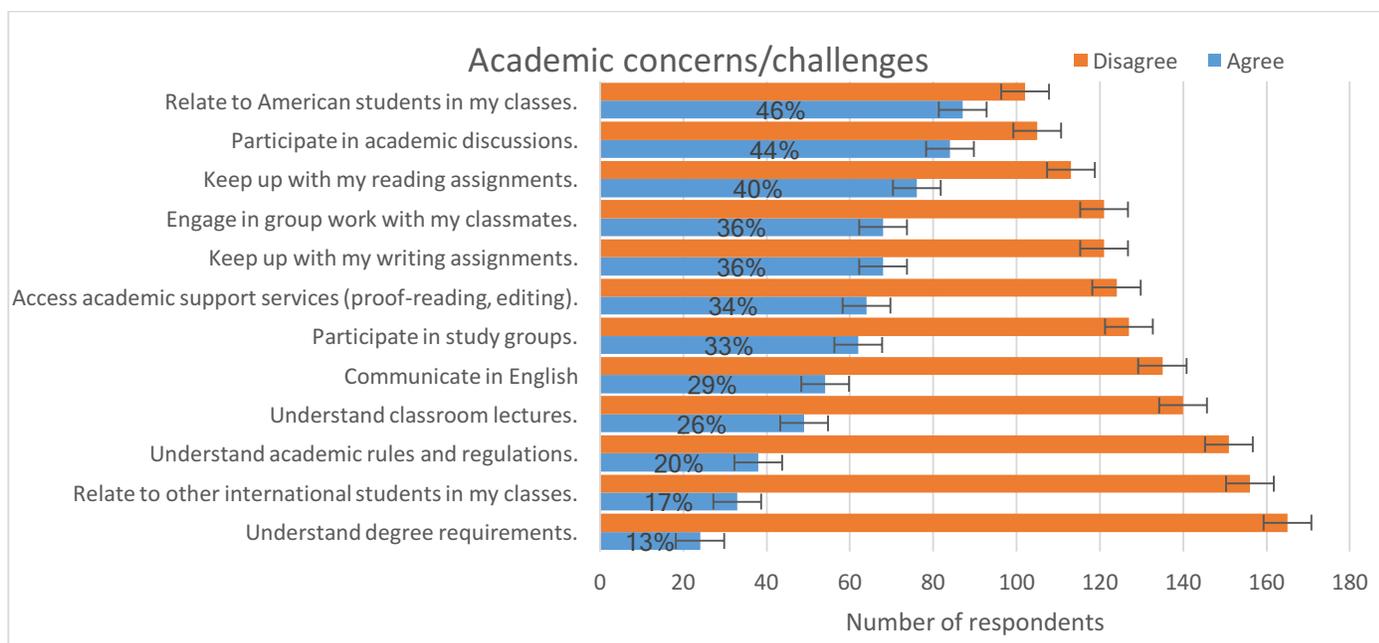


Figure 10: Academic concerns/challenges (N=189)

Summary of relevant quotes:

“International students tended to associate with one another more often, just like American student. I had to intentionally make an effort to work with American students. It felt uncomfortable to contribute freely in class because of my different accent.”

It is always a shock to come and study. We receive training or induction as international students, but American students do not get any single information about us, so it is a one-way street here, and I think American students benefit a lot from us. It was shocking for me also the huge classroom sizes for some classes and that the professor was just lecturing without engaging with students.”

“Although most people welcome others who are different, it is hard to relate when your experiences don't match those of your cohort. However, it is also true that over time we all find the niche that works best for us. It is not only about the language, it's also about the willingness (yours and others) to connect and understand others who are different to you.”

“really need a service of proof reading. writing center is for undergrad students. it is very limited for grad students to use their service. even though we could use, the topic is not necessarily easy for the instructor there to help you. it would be really nice if we could have proof reading system, especially for international students coming from non-english speaking countries and a service like writing center to reinforce our writing skills following our scientific way.”

8. Challenges interacting with faculty, instructors & staff

A total of 188 - 190 students and alumni responded to items in this section that aimed at understanding whether interacting with faculty, instructors, and staff posed challenges for the international student. Overall, the majority did not indicate challenges in interacting with faculty,

instructors, and staff. However, slightly less than one-third agreed/somewhat agreed it was challenging in dealing with faculty (28%) and staff (27%) who were insensitive to their needs as international students. (Figure 10).

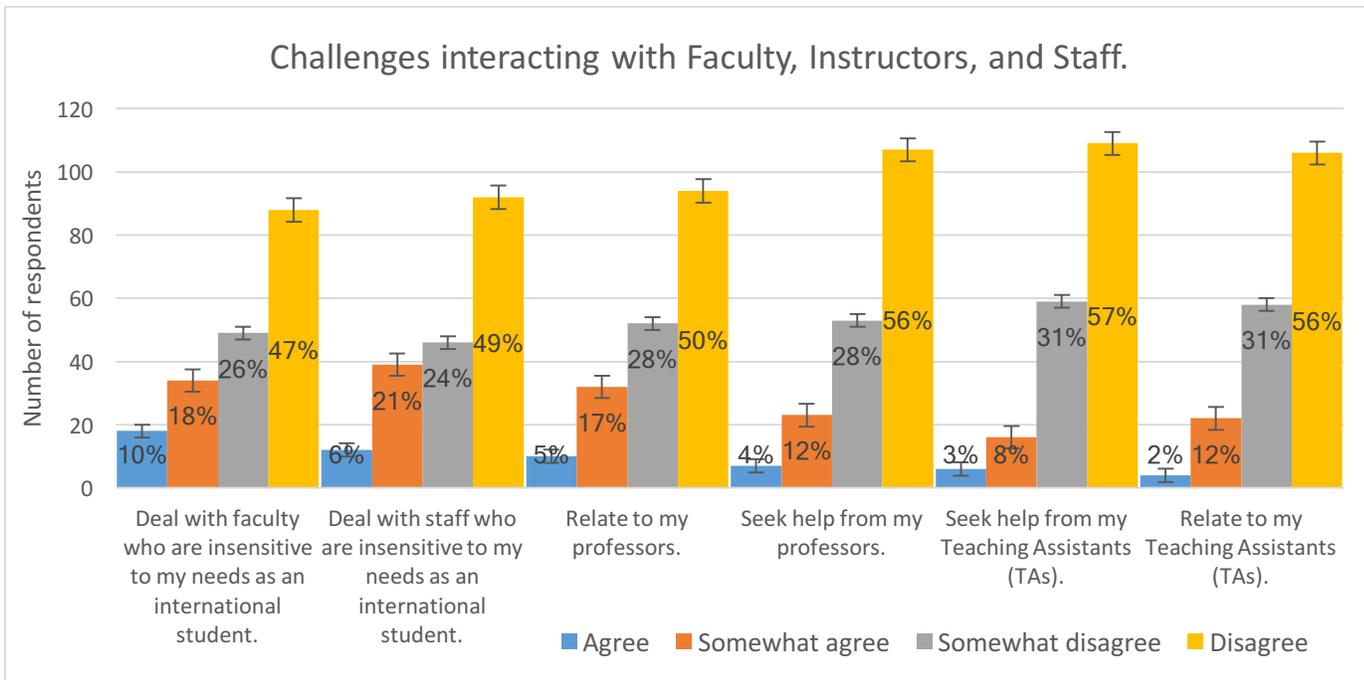


Figure 11: Interacting with faculty, instructors & staff (N=188-190)

Summary of relevant quotes:

“I had some TAs that were terrible, also some instructors (advanced PhD students). They need to understand that we take more time for everything. But I also had great TAs and great instructors, so that balanced the experience.”

“Everyone has been excellent and very supportive in helping me try to achieve my goals despite the complexities of being an international student. I really especially appreciate the faculty who have gone out of their way to help me make connections and to offer me advice on my career progression.”

“Again, this line of questioning seems to assume that the issues related to working with faculty, instructors and staff are related to being an international student. I had both positive and negative experiences working with faculty, instructors and staff but not because I was an international student.”

9. Overall words of advice, comments, and recommendations from international students and alumni

The following are some of the respondent’s final words of advice and recommendations.

“International students do have special contributions to UNC Campus and do have special needs deserve great support from UNC. As the world is more connected and open, any efforts to make UNC more attractive internationally is

progressive, any efforts to make current UNC international students satisfied with their choices to come is a worthwhile investment. Thank you for hearing voice from international students.”

“I love Gillings and UNC. When I accepted my admission offer almost 3 years ago, I did not know how excellent the institution really was. I am extremely satisfied with my time and endeavors at Carolina and I would choose to come here again if I was given the option.”

“A lot more information is needed by prospective international students than currently offered online. The buddy system is great, but that's helpful after admission. Before admission, I struggled to find information I needed to know what my degree program entailed. For example: I had no idea what a major and minor is really and there was no way to tell from online resources. Another challenge was how GPA system converts to A-F grading system used in many countries outside the US to determine if my grades met the requirements for UNC admission.”

“Visa documents, taxes and healthcare are the most challenging aspects of being an international student.”

“I think what work best for me was early on to establish good friendship with other students, particularly native born student. Also, engaging faculties very regularly was also very helpful.”

10. Demographic information

Figures 11-17 display demographic and departmental affiliation information, as described by the respondents who answered these items. The majority of respondents were female students and alumni. In addition the majority of the respondents who answered both questions of departmental affiliation and current status are affiliation to three departments; BIOS, HPM, ESE. The median age of the majority of students and alumni was 26-30 years old when first enrolled. When it came to home countries the East Asia and sub-Saharan Africa regions led in terms of number of respondents with 26% and 16% respectfully. In terms of programs, 46% of were studying or studied at the masters level, 44% were doctoral and 7% undergraduate (7%) levels, while 1% were exchange student/non-degree seeking scholar students or alumni. When invited to state whether they would choose to attend the UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health again, 90% of respondents agreed with this statement. Over 65% said they would definitely or probably (28%) recommend the UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health to others.

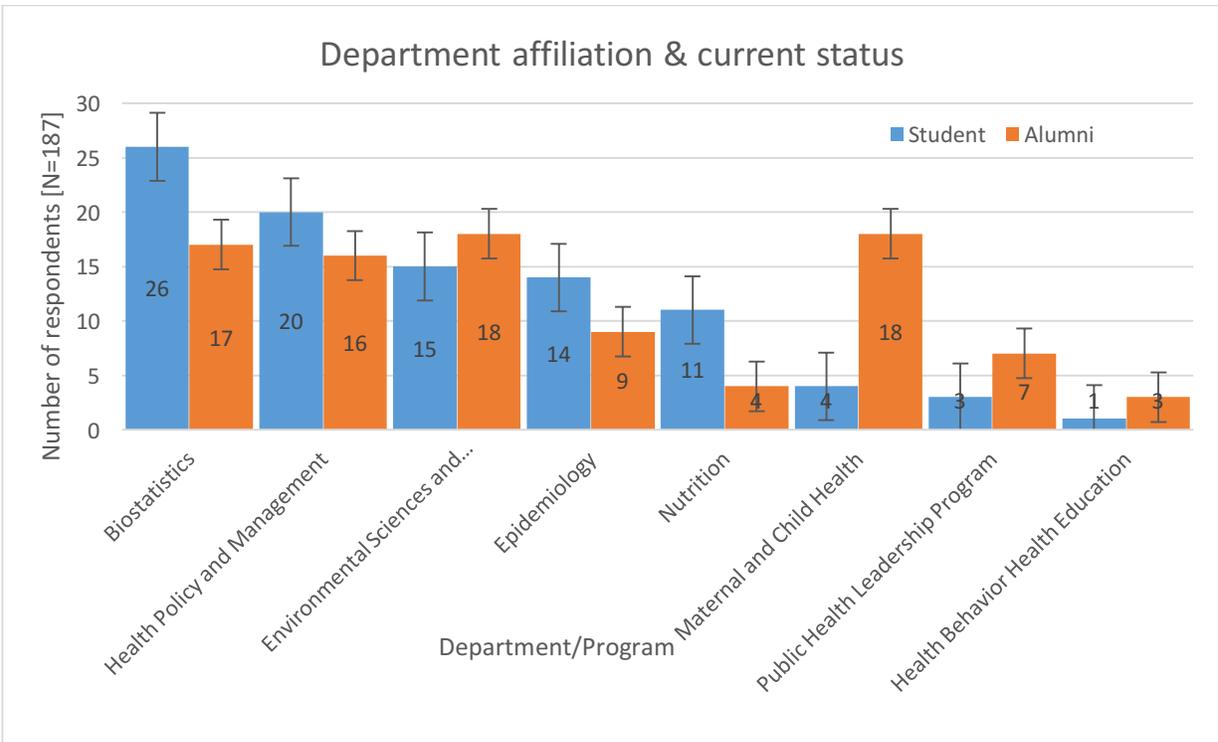


Figure 12: Department affiliation & current status (N=187)

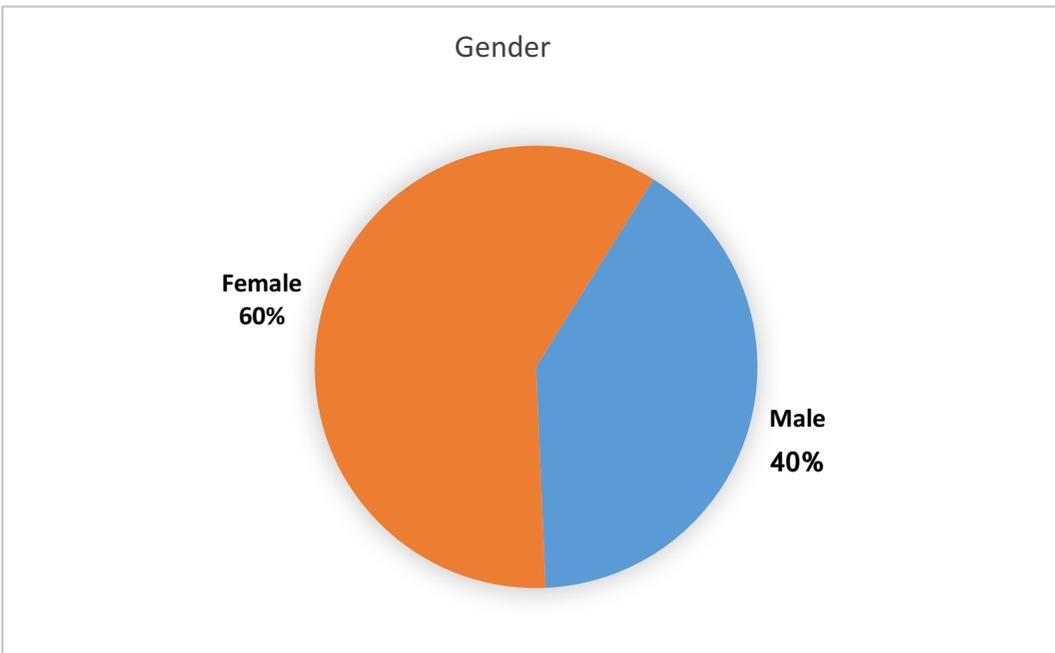


Figure 13: Gender (N=188)

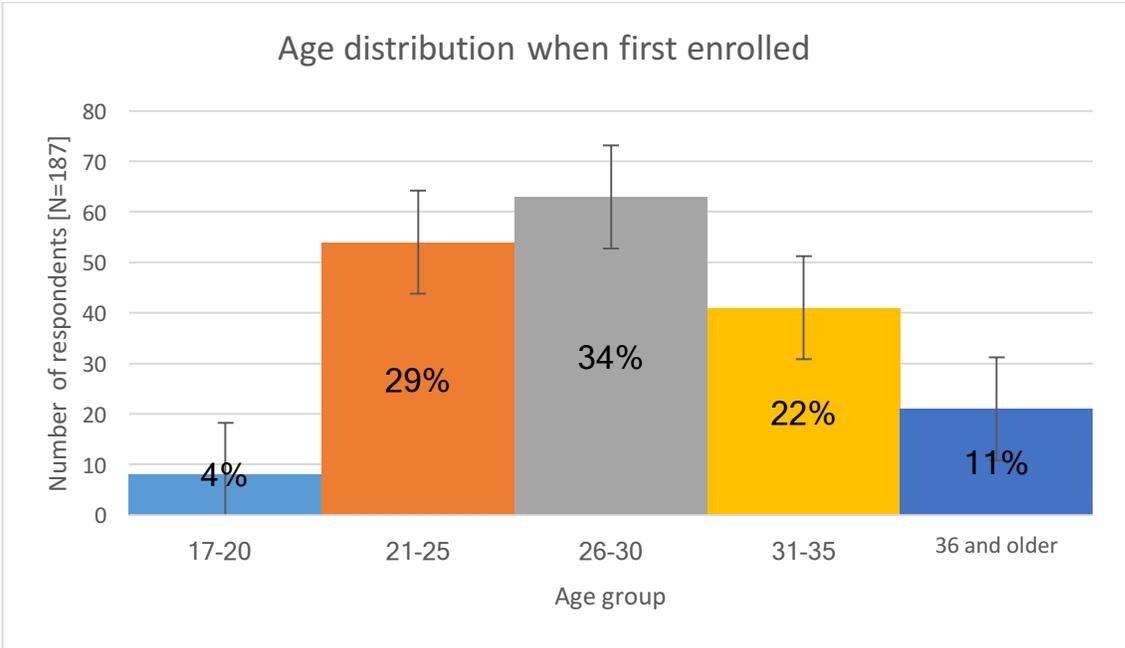


Figure 14: Age when first enrolled (N=187).

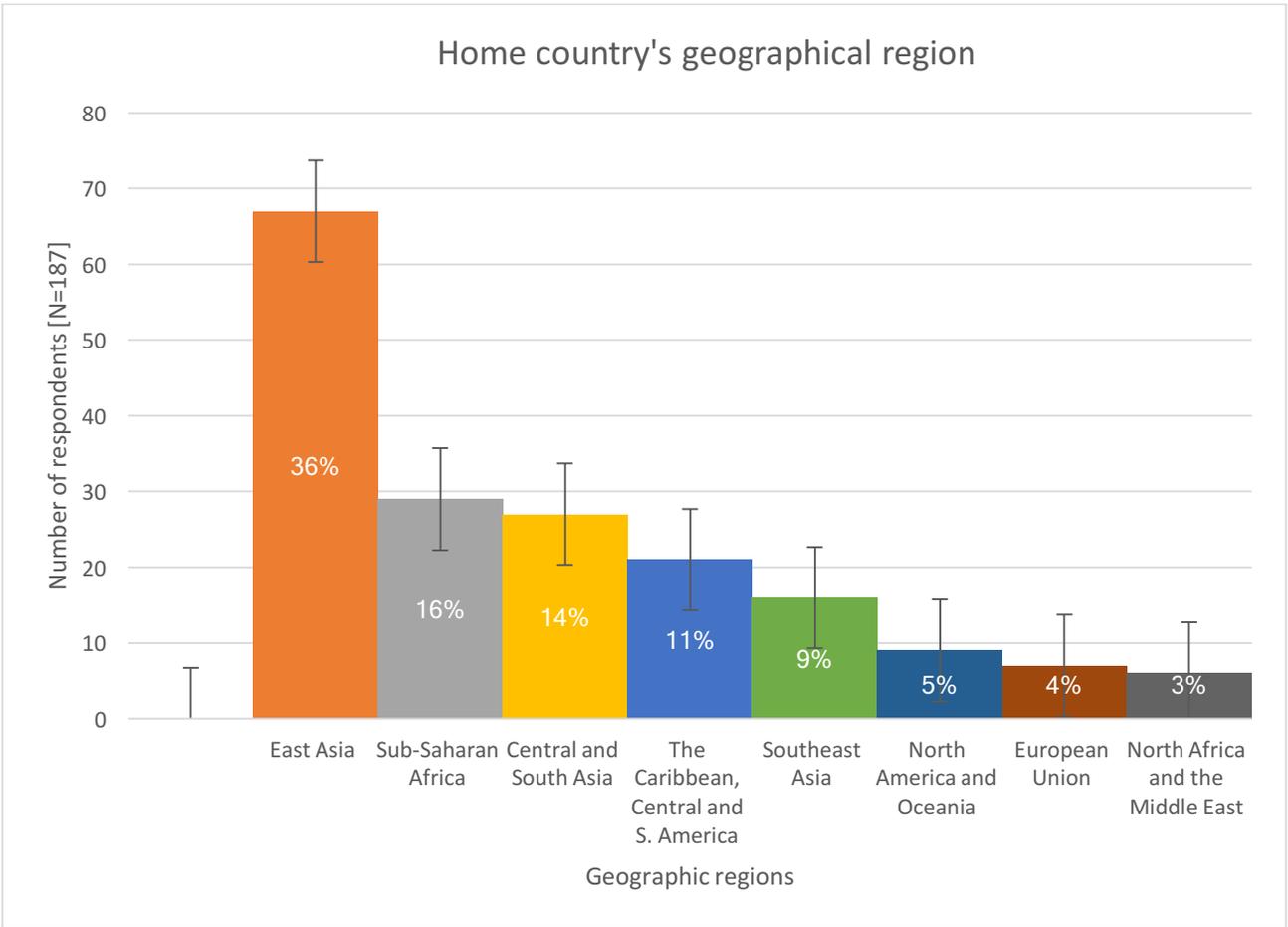


Figure 14: Geographic region of home country (N=187)

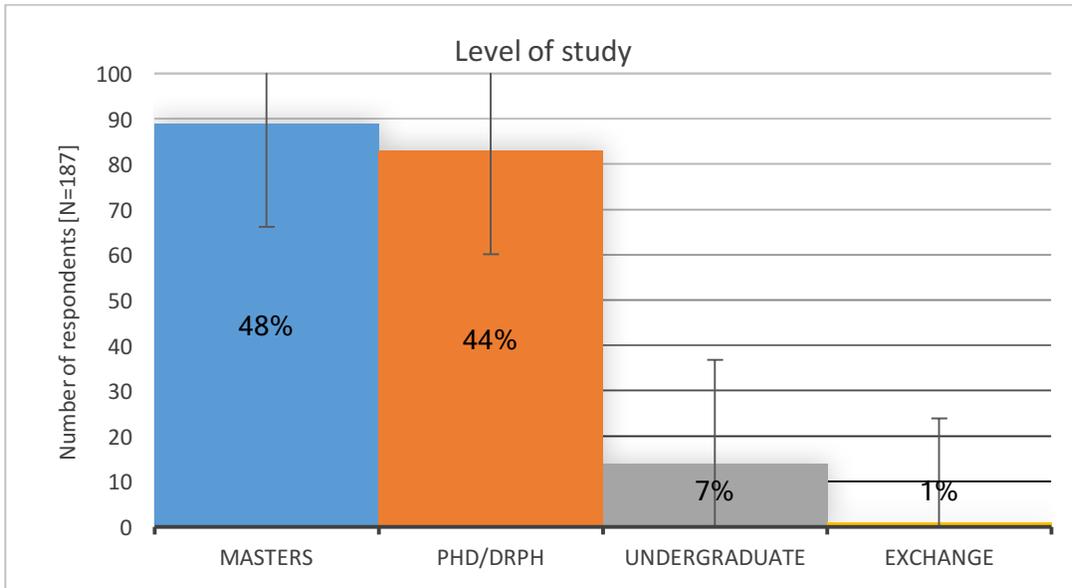


Figure 15: Level of study (N=187)

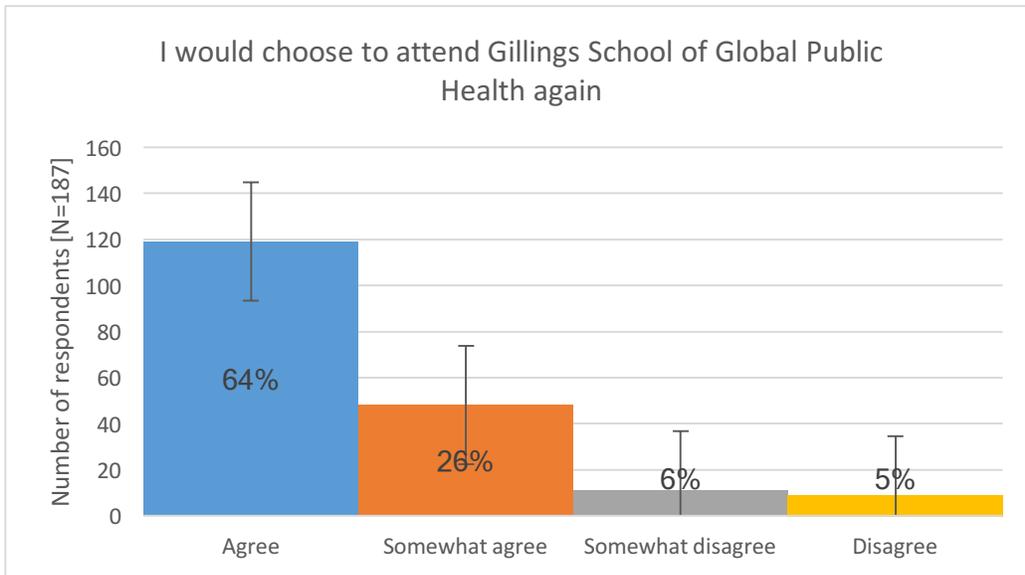


Figure 16: Would chose Gillings School of Global Public Health again (N=187)

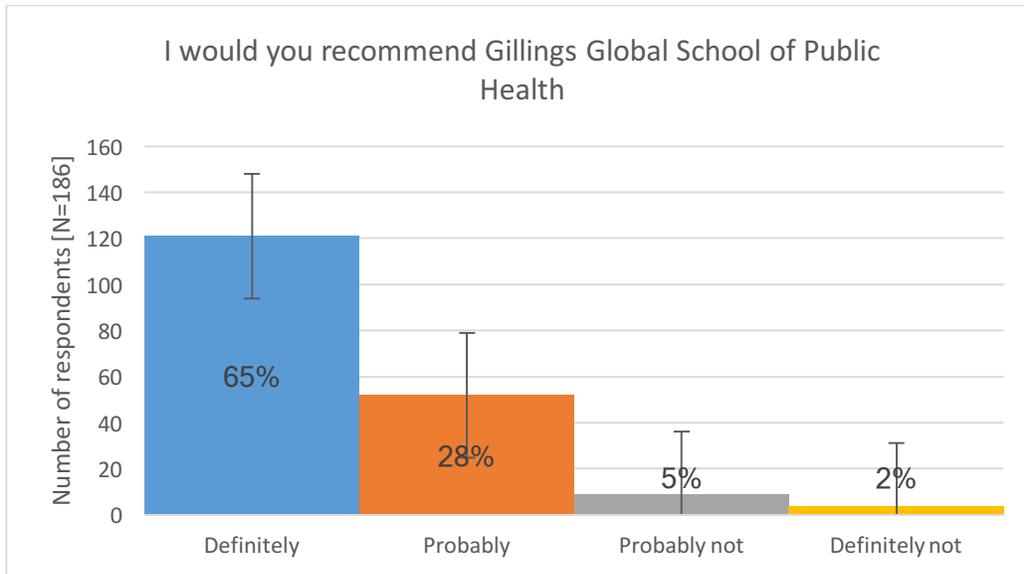


Figure 17: Would recommend Gillings School of Global Public Health)(N=186)

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