

Some Key Take-Aways from SAS OUE's November 10, 2023 panel
International Student Stories

On November 10, the SAS Office of Undergraduate Education began the fourth year of its *Voices of Diversity: Rutgers Student Stories* program with a panel about international students' experiences. The program began in 2020-2021 with support from a RU-NB Diversity, Inclusion, and Community Engagement grant, and is designed to provide students with a platform to share with faculty their perspectives as students with diverse and intersectional identities. The Student Advisory Board -- a team of 13 undergraduate students that represent the breadth and richness of the SAS community, including a range of majors and class years -- develops the panel topics for the year, selects panelists based on the essays of de-identified applicants, and composes the questions for the panels.

Thank you to the Student Advisory Board and the volunteer panelists for the tremendous amount of time, energy, and mental and emotional labor that went into designing, preparing for, and participating in *Voices of Diversity*. We are also grateful to the SAS-OUE team for their work on this initiative, and especially to Jenevieve DeLosSantos for organizing this panel and serving as an advisor to the Student Advisory Board members and Nicole Gangino for her extensive support and assistance throughout the entire process of creating and hosting this event. Finally, thank you to Flora McVay, Program Manager for International Academic Support through Rutgers Global, for moderating this panel.

The panel included international students from China, India, Afghanistan, and Turkey. These students had some experiences in common as international students, but they also shared a variety of individual experiences and perspectives, as distinct individuals with unique identities and histories. Unfortunately, it is not possible to include all of their helpful and insightful contributions in a brief document. Below, however, we have summarized a few common themes that emerged from the students' comments.

Please plan to join us next semester for our Spring 2024 *Voices of Diversity* panels!

Voices of Diversity: International Students at Rutgers

The panelists shared many positive impressions of Rutgers and described being drawn to the school by the variety of opportunities available to students.

"I chose Rutgers not only because of its rankings and excellent pharmacy program, but [also] very sure I'd be able to find my community in a foreign land. That's what interested me."

"Also [in addition to what the student quoted above said], because it's such a huge school that offers lots of opportunities to find your community. Also, Rutgers' history as one of the oldest schools in the US—I wanted to be a part of that."

"Why Rutgers? Many lists: diversity here, warm welcoming community here for all international students, standards levels of excellence here, and ranking of the University were the main reasons."

"It was the only school I applied to. My mom was here as a visiting scholar, so I came for a short visit. Mostly applied out of unawareness—it wasn't until I came here that I realized what I signed up for."

Financial and employment-related challenges emerged as key concerns among the panelists.

Students spoke positively about some employment opportunities they've had through Rutgers, but the group stressed how challenging and stressful it is to find employment opportunities they can take advantage of and how competitive it is to get these positions since they are competing with all other students.¹

"The biggest challenge of being an international student is the financial aspect."

- Tuition and the cost of living are expensive for international students.
- Visa restrictions mean that students can often only work on campus, but students don't always know that and spend time looking for off-campus employment. Many on-campus job opportunities are through the Federal Work Study program, for which international students are not eligible, and other on-campus jobs are competitive and can be very difficult to secure.

"International tuition is more than double that of in-state and there are conversion fees. On top of that, I don't have as many job opportunities as national students. Friends work in libraries or student centers, but almost all of them are reserved for the work study program for which I'm not eligible. Under my visa, I can only do on-campus jobs for 20 hours per week, but I haven't been able to find one so far because they're so competitive."

"Right now, [I am] working with [on-campus department]. It's a campus part-time job... Initially, I was trying to find a job off campus—I didn't know there was a restriction. I applied at a bakery. The person was impressed and willing to pay me above minimum wage. He gave me a form that said you have to include your SSN, I had no idea what that is... I now work on-campus 18-20 hours /week and currency conversion is a big deal, too. I forgot that I'm in America and have to

think as an American, now the currency is dollars. I'm earning in dollars, and spending in dollars."

"Employers aren't aware of CPTs and OPTS. They should be aware they don't pay any costs." (Information about these practical training programs, which authorize temporary off-campus employment and internships for students with F-1 visas, is available from Rutgers Global [here](#).)

"I'd really appreciate if Rutgers could provide either scholarships or places where I can gradually build up my resume. That's the best I could hope for."

"It's hard for everyone to find jobs. Even harder for people like us. In order to be an intern, you need to have one-year intern experience. All of my experiences are in China, which they don't even acknowledge sometimes."

- Despite these considerable challenges, panelists also praised some departments and offices for their considerable support and assistance with navigating complicated legal requirements and connecting students with internship opportunities.ⁱⁱ

"One of the main issues we had was getting health insurance. Since I'm an immigrant, I don't have a student visa, so I faced a lot of difficulty. Ru-Global [and a program leader], in particular, helped us a lot to obtain a very important part of life here in the US. Without that, you can't continue day-to-day life. I truly thank the department."

"Rutgers University Political Science has helped students to have access to internships that are available from Congress, senators, and others.... for international students who are always anxious and nervous about their future in the US... having these kinds of resources is very important, and I'm glad and honored to." (This student is a recent immigrant and is not on an F1 student visa.)

- Students' concerns about employment opportunities extended beyond their experiences as students and included concerns about post-graduation job and career opportunities. Panelists described being at a competitive disadvantage with domestic students and suggested that it would be helpful to have opportunities designed specifically for international students.

"I'm currently trying to find an internship going from sophomore to junior... I'm sad, I feel behind my classmates. Look at Linked In, other people are posting where they're starting. When I apply, they always ask will you now or in future require sponsorship? I say yes because I can't lie, and they automatically reject you without looking at your resume. My future depends on this, because if I don't find an internship within a year, I have to go back to India."

"For international students, it's definitely more competitive to get a job. Fighting for jobs with native students who have the upper hand. Companies choose them because hiring international students might be more complicated. I appreciated mega fairs and other networking events, but

it would be helpful to have more events to help us look more distinct for companies. Maybe a more specialized career fair for international students could maybe help us."

"I'm from a small town in China. My parents make less than the average in NJ. My friends say I must be rich because my parents are paying, but they are using their life's saving to pay for me to be here. A H1B visa [for permanent employment here after graduation] is so hard to get. It is very scary. I really want to stay here."ⁱⁱⁱ

The panelists discussed their experiences with making friends and connections within the Rutgers community.

- Making friends and connections is often challenging, at least initially. Panelists described some classroom activities (including presentations and group projects with assigned groups) and clubs/social events as important opportunities to forge connections.

"I have to start from scratch and force myself out of my comfort zone to at least present myself as an extrovert and be willing to talk to people in classes to get to know people gradually. For me, joining a group or attending events isn't a choice, but is necessary to develop skills and expand my friend group a little bit."

"Culture shock, linguistic differences were very challenging. I was very intimidated to talk with natives—I'd always go through sentences in my head before saying out loud. There's been adequate support from University—orientation, introduced to all the resources on campus. Although the process has been difficult, I've learned to do everything myself. As you said, I'm young. My family was concerned that I'd be young and alone. I've learned to do it all myself—classes, financial, if I'm sick, deal with it. Also, I had a hard time communicating with people and was afraid, but this has given me a lot of opportunities to overcome that fear and I wouldn't have been able to do that if I'd been in India."

"It is hard not to feel like [just] another face on campus, given the size... Sports became a bridge and allowed me to bond with other people... Beyond sports, another good thing about Rutgers, because of such a vast student body, there's something for everyone. Especially the many clubs—very good for international students because there's a lot of interest groups. Easier to go engage with those groups. Even if you don't feel like you belong to Rutgers and America, you'll still belong to that group... It was hard for me to transition, but those clubs and activities allowed me to find people with similar mindsets to me and it helped me get out of my shell and get involved at Rutgers."

"My struggle was because Rutgers is so large and complex; all the different campuses. Made it hard for me to socialize... most people come with their friend groups from New Jersey, but I would take the bus the first weeks and in class people already had their friend groups—it was intimidating and hard to reach out and make friends. But the group projects in class eased me into meeting people. Helped me improve my confidence and presentation skills."

- Students described struggles with homesickness and being so far away from their families, particularly early-on during their time at Rutgers.

"It is not feasible to go back every break because tickets are so expensive. Can be frustrating when you are alone and navigating through that."

"Honestly, I've spent a lot of time this semester rethinking my decision [to come to Rutgers]. 'Why am I here? Is it worth it?' Because of the time difference, I can't communicate with my family when I'm feeling low or alone. I also feel guilty because I'm not there when they need me. It takes up a lot of time thinking about it. Has an impact on academics."

"At first, it was hard to blend in with multiple challenges and struggles—homesickness, cultural shock—but RU Global in particular made it much easier for us, including professors who I wholeheartedly thank. They've made it much easier for me and my fellow Afghan students to continue our education at Rutgers."

- Panelists also suggested that additional University-level opportunities for international students to meet other students would be helpful.

"There could be more events that incorporate international students to speak out their voices, but not if the title of that event is 'Chinese Students,' 'Indian Students,' or 'International Students.' Then local students won't be interested because it's not designed for them... so are there any ways that we can involve international students without specifying that this is only for them?... But in general, in order to have a better understanding, it's better to have more opportunity for connections, conversation, discussion... People would be interested in parties, and food, and music. Those are always good things to attract people. If you say there's free steamed buns -- my Russian boyfriend hates communism, but he loves Chinese food."

Students described some key differences between the American educational system and the systems they'd experienced before coming to Rutgers.

- Panelists described having to adjust to major differences in academic requirements, pedagogical approaches, and the types of technology and systems at Rutgers.

"Biggest challenge first year: academic requirements. The approach in India is quite different... there is more of a theoretical approach. One final exam, nothing more. Here: lots of exams, building on small things—not just one exam. More practical approach: group projects, team projects. That was difficult at first—I did horribly my first semester—I wasn't able to understand requirements; prereqs in RBS, and Core requirements we had to take."

"First day of my semester, one class I went to Livi and found out the class was canceled. They had posted that on the syllabus, and not on announcements. I didn't look at the syllabus. Also, I had a few difficulties with using the online platforms. I have missed a lot of deadlines because of that. Emailed profs and they were very supportive about it."

- Several panelists mentioned that the RU-FIT First Year International Student Transition Course was extremely valuable in helping them learn about Rutgers and navigate through the many complexities and systems.

"I would have had issues, but RU-Fit class led by peer mentors taught me a lot of stuff. Taught me how to navigate online and in-person resources, like the writing and math centers."

"Whole technology is quite different here. One thing that helped me was a transition course—RU-Fit. That course was very good. Helped me to understand Canvas, Degree Navigator, how to search for classes... Profs on the first day of class -- I appreciate that they don't teach anything and just explain the syllabus. Everything is organized here in the US—they know on this day we teach this, clearly organized and planned at the beginning of the semester, clear guidelines and expectations at the start of the class. That's quite good."

- Students mentioned that some specific pedagogical strategies—presentations and group work, in particular—were challenging, but also provided important and valuable opportunities for growth and learning.

"US taught me to speak in public, gain confidence in presenting yourself to the public. First semester, SAS requirement had individual presentation at the end of the semester for whole 15 minutes based on a project. I was confident about project but not presenting—I asked professor if I could not present; he said no, it's a learning experience. I prepared a lot in front of the mirror, and then I gave the presentation and it turned out to be pretty good. So I'm quite happy right now. I'm quite good in public speaking, and now I tend to take the lead in group projects. I like to speak in public now, and if I had been in India, I wouldn't have had this opportunity to speak more often. They don't have group projects—more individual approach, no quizzes, no assignments, just one final exam determines your grade."

"This semester, I have a class completely based on groups. It was good that the prof randomly assigned groups. Could have been awkward if people choose their own. We have to sit with the group every time. We tend to bond. We've met a couple of times outside of class and I've learned from them a lot. They are sophomores and freshmen, so I give freshmen advice and learn from my peers. They're different majors, which is helpful for me to understand their experiences and internships. It's been quite helpful for me."

Panelists shared what that they'd want their instructors to know and do to support international students:

- Be aware of cultural/religious holidays and try to avoid scheduling due dates, exams, and quizzes on those days or on the day after.
- Understand and acknowledge that international students face some unique challenges.

"[I wish] that most profs would know a little about how international students have to struggle and deal with problems like language barriers and cultural shock. But I also want them to know that I will learn to deal with this stuff by myself. I wouldn't want them to have a double standard or lower the bar for me, but I'd appreciate it if they could understand that I'm working on it.... Example: I was working on an article not required for any classes, asked people to proofread it, and finally submitted to my professor. She said, "You're doing as good as some of my American students are doing." She probably thought she was being encouraging, but for me, it's not really encouraging... In order to achieve even as much as the average American student can do, I'm putting extra effort in. If I can do extra, that means I'm working like triple or even harder. I hope to be appreciated or acknowledged. Wish they could know a little."

- Panelists also praised some of their classes in which the instructors may have had more experience with international students:

"Surprisingly, writing courses helped me to improve my GPA. I like to write; I do creative writing a lot. But understanding academic requirements is different here. Big difference between creative and academic writing... I was confused about this when I came here. This one class—Expos—I was scared because I was reading reviews and it says it was one of the hardest classes at RU. But I told prof my first day that I was an international student, and I'm the only one in the class, and I've never done this stuff before and asked her to go over it with me in office hours. She helped me a lot—taught me how to read papers, how to understand differences, how to cite papers, how to find papers. She was a great human being—also an Indian, so maybe that's how she understood me more."

"One professor I liked a lot probably read a lot of papers or things... he was more objective because he actually knew these things from another perspective. I felt like he actually understands them [the political and cultural differences between the US and China]."

- Avoid stereotyping international students. This is an issue not just among instructors, but also among students and others in the Rutgers community.

"So, there are also various types of stereotypes—if I'm from India and a brown guy...I was talking with my professor, and he was surprised I'm a finance and not CS major. People automatically assume that if I'm from India, I'll automatically be a CS or Data Science guy."

"I know that Rutgers has quite a big international student community, so I guess even under this big background, Rutgers professors could make us feel that they know more than people who are outside... they have more of a... point of view, based on facts instead of just stereotypes based on biased press reports. That would make us feel better."

- The panelists had varying opinions about whether it is helpful/appropriate for instructors to ask international students to discuss their personal experiences in the classroom setting. Some amount of this variation may reflect the very different historical and political contexts in the students' countries of origin; the subject matter of the course may make a difference as well.

Given such varying opinions, a good option might be for instructors to be open to international students volunteering to share based on their experiences, but not calling on them unprompted to do so.

"It's rewarding for international students to have someone interested in them. It's a signal that everyone cares about and is interconnected to each other. That's what I love about RU. When there's an inside joke, everyone knows, and it makes it like a family; everyone knows and cares about each other. One of the things I love—profs always refer to you when there's an issue/topic (I'm in Poli Sci), and your input is very valuable in that moment when a prof asks and you can be the decisionmaker or game changer about that particular topic. Not just in Poli sci, as an international student, you are the game changer and have the responsibility to represent the best of you and your culture. I think it's very important." (Student from Afghanistan)

"My experience is kind of the contrary. More often than not, I'd try not to mention being an international student because other than some superficial conversations about food/traveling, people would say "that must be hard for you" or "I like the food there." Also because of the special relationship between US and China, they don't know much about my background, and they'd only want to know things that wouldn't go too deep into these cultural differences if we had these conversations. It's normal that people wouldn't want to go into something that probably would be depressing or upsetting—they don't want to know these struggles. Whenever it goes deeper, comes to politics, they would ask something that could be harmful to me at some point, or hurtful. They would ask questions that seem to me pretty biased, but since I'm the minority here, sometimes I don't have many things to justify it. Sometimes these questions are straightforward "What happened in 1984?" "How do you feel about Communists?" But I can't really prove much, but sometimes I say there's nothing we can know right now because sometimes media can be biased, and we can't tell if the evidence is really true. Cultural difference is not always a positive aspect. Also, for classes, I feel like it happens more than not that my profs would not specifically address me as someone from a different culture to offer a different perspective unless I raise my hand and am willing to do it. Otherwise, it would be putting me on the spot. I appreciate that, actually, that they were trying not to put me on the spot."

The panel concluded with the students sharing advice for prospective international students

"I'd say try to attend every little event you get, even those with little notifications about cookie decorating workshops. Try to attend everything you can because you'll never know who you'll meet, and meeting people will definitely make your experience at Rutgers."

"Since [the Rutgers] community is so large, a student feels like a number in the thousands. But you'll definitely find your community even if it takes a while. You should enjoy the journey instead of worrying about the eventual outcome."

"Networking, networking, networking. America can't be done without networking. Attend all events and don't get overwhelmed. Pace yourself, be slow, understand your surroundings and you'll be great."

ⁱ For more information on work restrictions for those on F1 student visas, please contact Rutgers International Scholars and Students Services here: <https://global.rutgers.edu/international-scholars-students/students/current/employment>. Please also direct concerned students to this page which includes important resources for them.

ⁱⁱ Rutgers Global ISSS partners closely with Career Exploration and Success (CES), to host events specifically for international students.

ⁱⁱⁱ For instructors and students looking for more information about H1B visa requirements, check with Rutgers International Scholars and Students Services here: <https://global.rutgers.edu/international-scholars-students/students/current/employment>.