

# **Graduate and Professional Student Government International Graduate Student Assessment 2020-2021**

## **Purpose of Assessment**

The Graduate and Professional Student Government (GPSG) wanted to assess the experience of international graduate students at Texas A&M to identify areas in which GPSG can help improve their student experience and quality of life at Texas A&M. More specifically GPSG wanted to understand international graduate students' experiences as they encounter processes unique to international students, like the I-20 processes, using the Terra Dotta system, and processes in applying and participating in Optional Practical Training (OPT). GPSG leadership contacted Student Life Studies in the fall of 2020 to assist them in creating and distributing the survey to international graduate students attending Texas A&M University (College Station) in spring 2021.

## **Key Findings and Recommendations**

Student Life Studies identified several key findings and developed actionable recommendations that the GPSG may take based on the results. However, the GPSG leaders and members may identify other findings using their knowledge and understanding of the community. GPSG leaders and members are strongly encouraged to read all the results and qualitative comments to gain a fuller understanding of the international graduate student experience.

- As the response rate was low (11%), care should be taken in making inferences from the survey results applied to all international graduate students on campus. Students who responded indicated satisfaction with the accuracy of their I-20 processing, and on average, were neutral regarding the timeliness of the processing and the responsiveness of Texas A&M representatives in responding to their questions. The data also indicates that respondents' experience with the process was inconsistent, and those least satisfied found the delays in processes and non-responsiveness of Texas A&M representatives added to their stress as an international student. Respondents also raised concerns regarding I-20 processing timeliness and responsiveness to their inquiries surrounding their applications to participate in Optional Practical Training (OPT).
- More than three-quarters of the respondents (88%) indicated using the new Terra Dotta software available to international students to manage their records. Over half of those who provided feedback after using it were complimentary, saying it was efficient, and user-friendly once the user was familiar with it. A few suggested that the software could be improved by being more user-friendly. Similarly, those who provided comments regarding the International Student Services website thought it was a good resource, but it too could be improved by being updated, streamlined in design and more user-friendly for its primary user, international students.
  - GPSG leaders are strongly encouraged to work with appropriate academic campus partners in sharing this information and working collaboratively on recommending changes. They could offer to organize an international student advisory committee to provide input and feedback as changes to be considered and implemented to enhance the international student experience with I-20 and OPT processes as well as support with student training mechanisms surrounding these processes.
  - As the international graduate students' experiences within the past year may have been affected by restrictions and changing guidelines due to the COVID 19 pandemic, GPSG may also want to reassess this international student experience with the same processes once restrictions ease with the dénouement of the pandemic, perhaps late fall 2021. GPSG is encouraged to contact Student Life Studies for assistance with a follow-up assessment if needed.

## **Method and Sample**

The survey was developed and distributed using Qualtrics®, a software program that creates web-based surveys and databases. The survey contained eight quantitative questions and four qualitative questions. Due to branching technology, not all respondents saw all questions. Responses were analyzed using SPSS®, a statistical software package, and Microsoft Excel®. Additionally, student demographics were gathered through the student information system.

The survey link was sent via email on March 11, 2021 to 3,452 Texas A&M international graduate students; however, the email addresses for 50 students were undeliverable. Non-respondents received up to four reminders before the survey closed on April 13, 2021. Of the 3,402 students receiving the survey link, 382 took some part of the survey, yielding an 11% response rate.

## **Results**

Results are reported as means, standard deviations (sd), and frequency percentages for the number of people (n) who responded to the question. For ease of reading, frequency percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole percent, so totals may not add up to exactly 100%. Not applicable response choices were removed from the analysis. Tables list data in decreasing frequency or mean order unless otherwise noted. Summary themes are reported in this report; the entire list of comments can be found in a separate document. Additional cross-tabulated response data to respondent demographics can also be found in separate documents. Data disaggregated by classification and country (citizenship) of student respondents also can be found in a separate document. Students' demographics were gathered from the University's information system based on the students' Unique Identification Number (UIN).

Respondents were first asked to rate their level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with elements when working with Texas A&M and the I-20 process. As shown in Table 1, respondents were most satisfied with the accuracy of the I-20 documents and least satisfied with the responsiveness of Texas A&M representatives to their questions about the process.

	<b>Very Satisfied (5)</b>	<b>Satisfied (4)</b>	<b>Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (3)</b>	<b>Dissatisfied (2)</b>	<b>Very Dissatisfied (1)</b>	<b>2021 Mean (sd) [n]</b>
<b>Accuracy of I-20 documents</b>	46%	40%	8%	3%	3%	4.23 (.93) [355]
<b>Timeliness of I-20 issuing process</b>	21%	35%	16%	15%	12%	3.38 (1.30) [358]
<b>Responsiveness of Texas A&amp;M representatives to your questions about the process</b>	22%	13%	19%	14%	13%	3.36 (1.31) [362]

Table 1: Experiences Working with I-20 Process

The standard deviation of responses to the lowest rated statement regarding the responsiveness of Texas A&M representatives to their questions was above 1.0, so that divergence of response was further explored by cross-tabulating the frequency of response of the scale points and the respondents' country (citizenship). Charts 1 and

2, below, show the respondents' country of citizenship representation (percentage) of response choice of very satisfied and those who chose very dissatisfied regarding the responsiveness of Texas A&M representatives. International graduate students from India and China made up the highest percentages of those who indicated they were very satisfied (Chart 1) and students from Iran and India made up the highest percentage of students indicating they were very dissatisfied (Chart 2). Those countries which have fewer than five students represented in the survey population are represented as "not identify" within the charts. Similar representations of satisfied, neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, and dissatisfied by students' country can be found in the accompanying documents of this report.

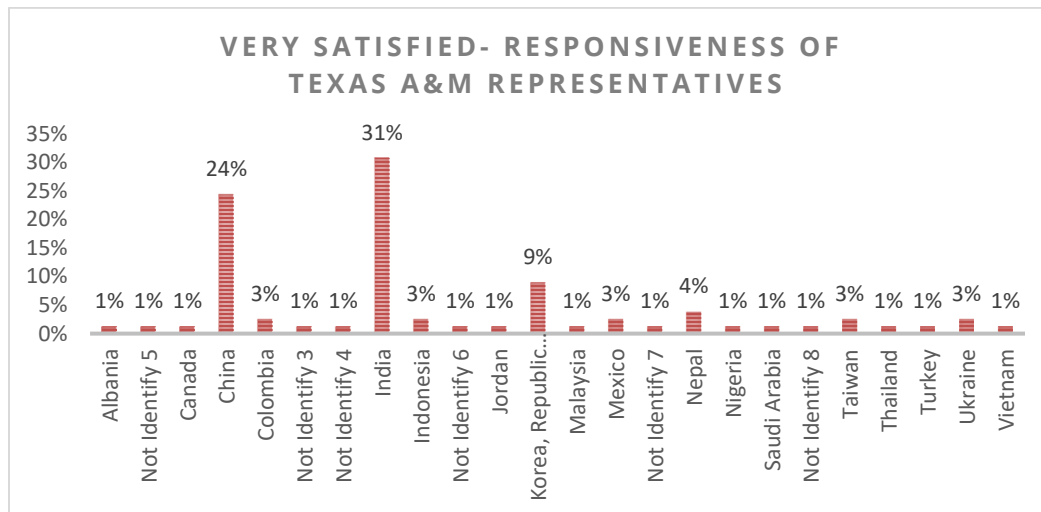


Chart 1: Very Satisfied Percent Response by Country (n= 78)

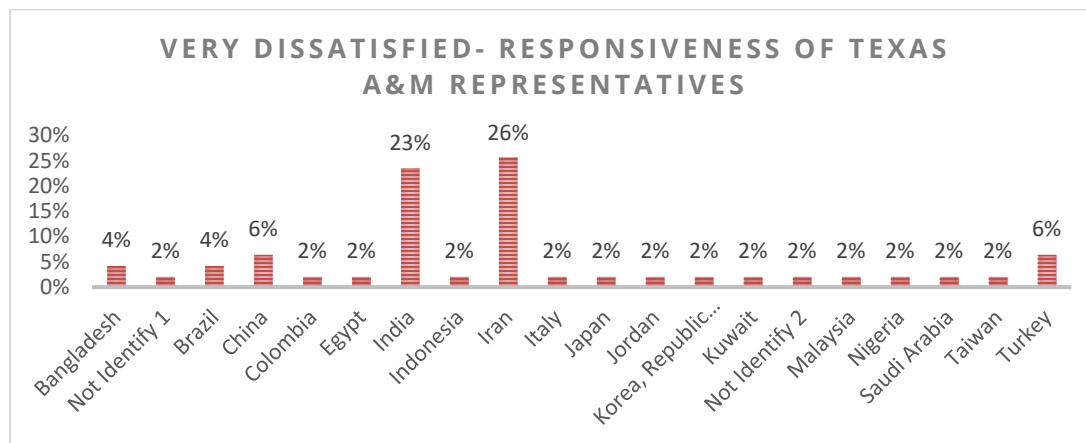


Chart 2: Very Dissatisfied Percent Response by Country (n= 47)

Respondents were asked to share any comments regarding their experience as an international graduate student at Texas A&M and the I-20 issuing processes. Many of the 118 who chose to comment shared that the I-20 process takes too long in general, it specifically takes too long at Texas A&M in comparison to other universities within the United States, and although the information available on the International Student Services website indicates an expected time to complete the I-20 processing, the students indicated that their experience exceeded that time. About one-third of the students indicated that Texas A&M University and International Student Services were not responsive to their inquiries regarding the I-20 processes, either not responding to emails or phone calls, or not responding within the time needed. One-sixth of the students who noted poor responsiveness also said they were treated rudely by the representative and the encounters created further stress for them.

Next, students responding were asked about how recently they accessed the Terra Dotta system. Table 2 shows that slightly more than one-third accessed the Terra Dotta system within the last month.

	<b>2021 Percent [n=369]</b>
<b>Within the last month</b>	35%
<b>Six or more months ago</b>	20%
<b>One to two months ago</b>	17%
<b>Three to five months ago</b>	16%
<b>I have not accessed the Terra Dotta system</b>	12%

Table 2: Last Accessed Terra Dotta System

Those indicating they had accessed the Terra Dotta system were then asked how often they had done so. A slight majority indicated they had accessed the system two to five times and almost one-third had accessed the system once, as noted in Table 3.

	<b>2021 Percent [n=318]</b>
<b>Two to five times</b>	54%
<b>Once</b>	30%
<b>Six to ten times</b>	10%
<b>More than ten times</b>	6%

Table 3: Frequency of Accessing Terra Dotta

Those who indicated they had accessed the Terra Dotta system were asked to share feedback regarding their experience with the Terra Dotta software system and processes involved in using it as an international graduate student at Texas A&M. Over half of the 40 comments were complimentary of the system, indicating it was efficient, good, streamlined the process and easy once the user got used to it. Others provided suggestions to improve the user-friendliness of the Terra Dotta system, such as including a withdrawal or back function to fix incorrect inputs, highlighting the submit function at the end to prevent the miss of that step, add more information regarding OPT, and include a sample 795 form filled out. About one-fifth of respondents' comments were more negative, indicating the Terra Dotta system was confusing, overly complicated, not user-friendly and could have a simpler interface.

Next, respondents were asked if they accessed information through the International Student Services (ISS) website (<https://iss.tamu.edu/> and its associated webpages) within the last six months. Of the 363 who responded, 76% responded yes, 15% responded no and 9% indicated they did not remember. Those who indicated using the website were asked about how useful the information they accessed through the ISS website was for them. Of the 276 respondents, 57% selected useful, 40% selected somewhat useful and 4% chose not useful. Those who indicated they accessed the website were then asked to share any comments regarding their experience with the ISS website as an international graduate student at Texas A&M University. Of the 40 who responded, about half noted the website as a good source of information. Some commented the website was wordy, seemed to provide "legacy" information that was not needed, and needed updating. A few respondents provided suggestions to improve the design of the website, such as benchmarking it against other university websites (e.g., Michigan State University). Other improvements suggested were publishing of an international student traveling plan checklist, provide information regarding the Schengen area states US travel ban and add access to the Terra Dotta system to the first page of the website.

The next series of questions addressed the international graduate students' experience with the Optional Practical Training (OPT) processes. Table 4, indicates that slightly more than half are considering OPT but have not yet participated.

	<b>2021 Percent [n=357]</b>
<b>I am considering OPT but have not yet participated</b>	58%
<b>I am not considering OPT</b>	16%
<b>I have applied for OPT but have not yet participated</b>	12%
<b>I have participated in OPT</b>	7%
<b>I am not eligible to participate in OPT (not an F1 student)</b>	7%

Table 4: Optional Practical Training (OPT) Status

All students reporting that they were eligible to participate in OPT were asked to share any comments regarding their experiences with the processes available through Texas A&M that enable participation in OPT. Of the 42 who responded, slightly more than one-third had concerns regarding the length of time it takes to apply and obtain documents related to OPT through Texas A&M. Quite a few of these responses indicated poor responsiveness to their emails and phone calls when trying to check on progress, challenges in the I-20 process for OPT specifically. Some noted delays that affected their employment, and some comments were anticipatory, expecting delays with the process prior to engaging in it and expressing worry that those delays will prevent them from participating in OPT. However, about one-quarter of the responses were more positive, mentioning the helpfulness of OPT preparatory workshops and webinars, help from advisors and the website.

The demographics of the students sent and responding to the survey were extracted using the University student database. Table 5, on the next two pages, shows the demographics in descending order of the respondent demographics. The majority of the respondents were doctoral students, from the College of Engineering and represented 53 of 111 countries represented in the student population sent the surveys. Those countries which have fewer than five students represented in the survey population are represented as "not identify" within the table.

	<b>Spring 2021 International Graduate Students</b>	
	<b>Survey Respondents n=382</b>	<b>Survey Population n=3,457</b>
<b>Classification</b>		
Doctoral	59%	64%

	Spring 2021 International Graduate Students	
	Survey Respondents n=382	Survey Population n=3,457
Masters	41%	36%
<b>College</b>		
Engineering	52%	56%
Agriculture & Life Sciences	10%	9%
Science	10%	10%
Liberal Arts	6%	6%
Education	6%	4%
Architecture	5%	5%
Business	4%	5%
Veterinary Medicine	3%	1%
Geosciences	2%	2%
Bush School of Government and Public Service	2%	1%
School of Law	<1%	<1%
<b>Country</b>		
India	35%	30%
China	19%	30%
Korea (Republic of)	6%	8%
Iran	5%	4%
Taiwan	4%	4%
Turkey	3%	4%
Bangladesh	2%	2%
Columbia	2%	1%
Indonesia	2%	1%
Mexico	2%	2%
Nepal	2%	1%
Nigeria	2%	1%
Brazil	1%	2%
Canada	1%	1%
Egypt	1%	1%
Germany	1%	<1%
Greece	1%	<1%
Guatemala	1%	<1%
Italy	1%	<1%
Japan	1%	<1%
Jordan	1%	1%
Kazakhstan	1%	<1%
Malaysia	1%	<1%
Pakistan	1%	1%
Philippines	1%	<1%
Russia	1%	<1%
Saudi Arabia	1%	1%
<b>Country</b>		
South Africa	1%	<1%
Thailand	1%	1%

	<b>Spring 2021 International Graduate Students</b>	
	<b>Survey Respondents n=382</b>	<b>Survey Population n=3,457</b>
Ukraine	1%	<1%
Venezuela	1%	<1%
Country not identified 1	1%	<1%
Country not identified 2	<1%	<1%
Country not identified 3	<1%	<1%
Country not identified 4	<1%	<1%
Country not identified 5	<1%	<1%
Country not identified 6	<1%	<1%
Country not identified 7	<1%	<1%
Country not identified 8	<1%	<1%
Country not identified 9	<1%	<1%
Country not identified 10	<1%	<1%
Country not identified 11	<1%	<1%
Iraq	<1%	<1%
Kuwait	<1%	<1%
Lebanon	<1%	<1%
Country not identified 12	<1%	<1%
Peru	<1%	<1%
Country not identified 13	<1%	<1%
Country not identified 14	<1%	<1%
Country not identified 15	<1%	<1%
Sri Lanka	<1%	<1%
United Kingdom	<1%	<1%
Vietnam	<1%	1%
All other countries with no student response*	--	4%

Table 5: Demographics

\*Represents students from 57 countries

## **Organization Background**

The Graduate and Professional Student Government (GPSG) is a sponsored student organization at Texas A&M University, advised through the Offices of the Dean of Student Life. The website, <https://gpsg.tamu.edu/home/about/> indicates that “The Graduate and Professional Student Government exists to work in cooperation with the Texas A&M University administration to ensure that the needs of graduate and professional students are understood and considered when campus policies concerning academic excellence, tuition and finance, and research are made.” GPSG sponsors programs for the university community such as Grad Camp, Student Research Week, Interdisciplinary Dinners and hosts the Graduate and Professional Student Wine Tasting.

## **Project Details**

As the survey response rate was low caution should be taken in making inferences based on the responses to the whole international graduate student population. Engagement in the survey may have been influenced by the COVID 19 pandemic and associated restrictions. Also, the international graduate student population surveyed included those associated with the Texas A&M University College Station site, so students within the Texas A&M

Health Science Center (including College of Pharmacy, Medicine, Public Health), Galveston and Qatar sites were not sent the survey. Texas A&M University professional students were also not included in the student population surveyed.

The Department of Student Life Studies provides quality assessment services, resources and assessment training for departments in the Texas A&M University Division of Student Affairs and student organizations. Services by Student Life Studies are funded, in part, by the Texas A&M University Advancement Fee. Results of this project and other assessment projects done through Student Life Studies can be found at

<https://studentlifestudies.tamu.edu/results/>. Additionally, anyone can follow Student Life Studies on Facebook.

To work with Student Life Studies for future assessment projects, please fill out the Assessment Questionnaire at <https://slsform.dsaapps.tamu.edu/>.

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