

## English as a Second Language Instruction at UW-Madison

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### Summary

In this analysis, we examine the course placement, enrollment trends, and retention and graduation outcomes for undergraduates placed into English as a Second Language (ESL) courses at UW-Madison. Key findings include:

1. Enrollments in ESL courses have increased by 54% over the last five years.
2. One reason enrollments have increased is because the number of international undergraduates has increased and these are the vast majority of students who need ESL instruction.
3. A second reason for increased ESL enrollment is because there is a trend toward students placing into lower-level ESL courses. These students need to enroll in more ESL courses to complete the ESL course sequence.
4. The main driver of the increase in lower-level ESL course placement is the increase in the number and percentage of new freshmen from China. Students from China disproportionately place into lower-level ESL courses.
5. A secondary driver of the increase in lower-level ESL course placement is an increasing number of new international transfer students. Despite having instruction in English for several years at their previous institutions, some of these students are placing into lower-level ESL courses.
6. Scores on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), required at the time of application for admission, are not good predictors of ESL course placement scores. This limits our ability to predict ESL course/curricular needs until shortly before the start of the semester, after enrolling international students have taken the ESL placement test.
7. Despite the challenges of taking college courses in a non-native language, ESL students have high second year retention rates at UW-Madison. Retention rates range from 93% (the same as the overall UW-Madison retention rate) to 97%, depending on the level of ESL placement. Retention rates are the highest for the lowest placing ESL students.
8. Compared to the overall UW-Madison six-year graduation rate, ESL students graduate from UW-Madison at lower rates. Six-year graduation rates for ESL students range from 70% for students in the lowest-level ESL courses to 77% for students in the two upper-level ESL courses (compared to 83% for all new freshmen at UW-Madison).
9. Of the students who graduate, a higher proportion of ESL students, except for the very lowest placed students, graduate in four years compared to the overall UW-Madison four-year graduate rate. This may be because the requirements of international student visas force the very behaviors that are known to be correlated with timely graduation – namely enrolling full time and on a continuous basis.
10. If we intend to continue to enroll a large number of international students, particularly those with lower level English skills, we need to provide stability in enrollment planning and in the curricular resources to support these students in ESL instruction.
11. Although not the focus of this analysis, we found evidence in the data used for this analysis that some students (around 10% of ESL students) are not completing the ESL sequence by taking the required courses in sequential semesters. We suggest that ESL administrators consider working with the Office of the Registrar to investigate using existing mechanisms (such as auto-enrollment, use of enrollment holds, or use of enrollment controls) to manage student enrollment progression through the ESL curriculum. In addition to supporting the pedagogical goals of the ESL program, it would also limit a factor that contributes to instability in curricular planning.

### Placement into ESL Courses

The ESLAT (English as a Second Language Assessment Test) is UW-Madison's placement test for English as a Second Language courses and is required for new students whose native language is not English and whose secondary school instruction was not in English. The ESLAT contains two parts (1: Listening, 2: Reading/Writing) that assess the strength of English language skills needed for success in academic work at UW-Madison.

Based on ESLAT scores, students are placed into one of five levels of ESL courses with the lower numbered courses for the weaker English students. These courses are intended to be taken sequentially and include:

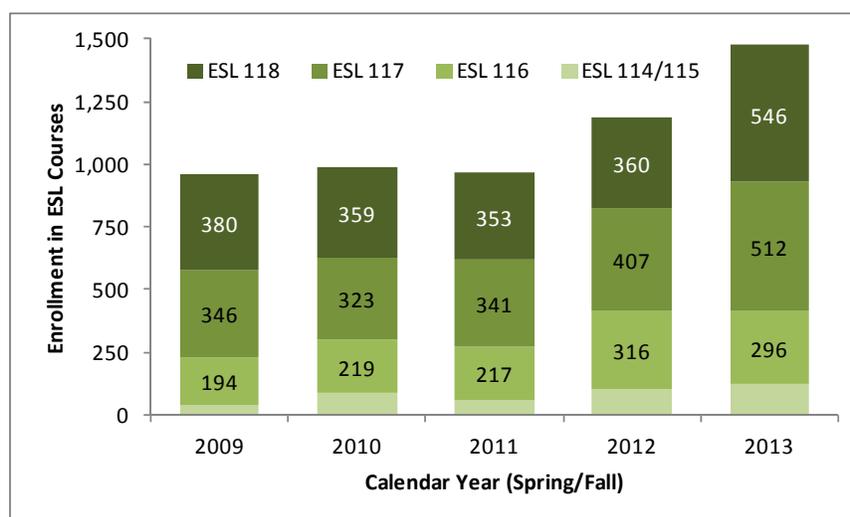
- English 114: Intermediate English Language Skills
- English 115: Grammar for Academic Use
- English 116: Academic Reading and Vocabulary Skills
- English 117: Academic Writing I
- English 118: Academic Writing II (this course fulfills the Communication A requirement for undergraduates like English 100 does for native English speakers).

At the time of admission to UW-Madison, Admissions staff members decide if new students need to take the ESLAT. Exceptions are rarely made. An example of an exception would be if a student's entire secondary school curriculum was in English. A few students score high enough on the ESLAT that they are exempted from ESL instruction but this is not common (less than 1% of international students). Because most new international students require ESL instruction, the number of international students who intend to enroll is a rough gauge of enrollment in ESL courses for the following semester.

### Enrollment Trends in English as a Second Language (ESL) Courses

Over the last five years, enrollment in ESL courses have increased by 54%, from 958 students in spring/fall 2009 to 1,474 students in spring/fall 2013 (Figure 1). Enrollment increases are especially pronounced at the lower course levels. Enrollments in ESL 114/115 over this time period have increased 216% (from 38 to 120 students).

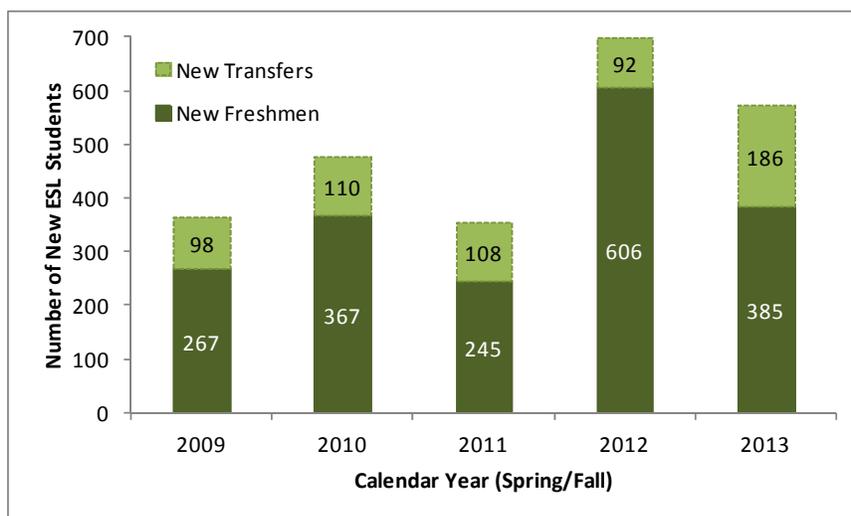
**Figure 1: Enrollment in ESL Courses by Year and Course**



One reason enrollments in ESL courses have increased is because there are more new students than there were five years ago who need ESL instruction (Figure 2). In 2012, a very large number of new undergraduates needing ESL instruction enrolled (698 students). The number of new ESL students in 2013 is lower (571 students), but is still substantially higher than it was five years ago.

In fall 2013, the number of new transfer students needing ESL instruction doubled from the previous year (186 transfer students). In addition to the larger number of new freshmen who need ESL instruction, the higher percentage of transfer students who need ESL instruction puts further pressure on the ESL curriculum. These kind of abrupt changes in the number and characteristics of the new freshman and new transfer classes makes it difficult to develop consistent long-term enrollment plans for ESL courses and meaningful and sustainable staffing patterns.

**Figure 2: Number of New Undergraduates Enrolled in ESL Courses**

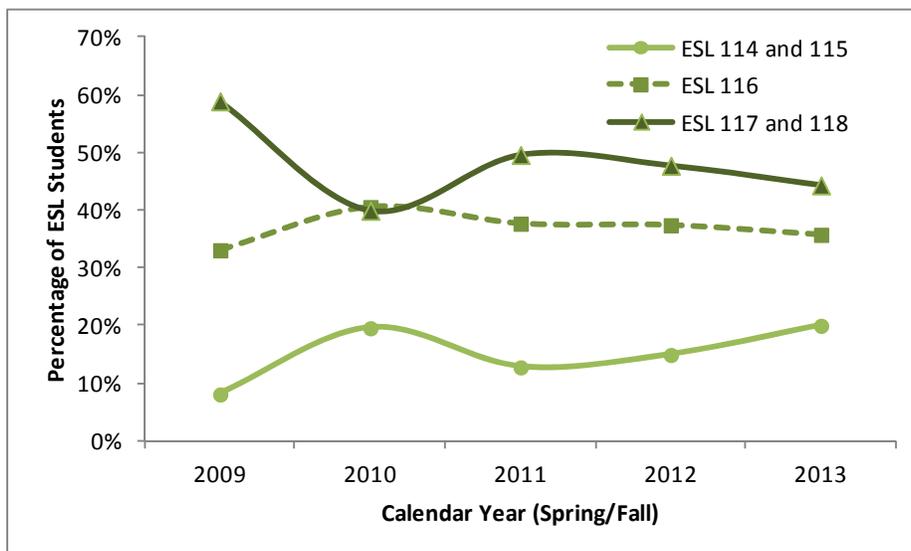


### Placement Trends in English as a Second Language (ESL) Courses

Another reason enrollments in ESL courses have increased is because a higher percentage of students are placing into lower level ESL courses. These students then need to enroll in more ESL courses to complete the ESL course sequence. For example, a student who places into ESL 115 needs to take four ESL courses to complete the required ESL course sequence. A student who places into ESL 117 needs two ESL courses to complete the required sequence.

Five years ago, in 2009, 59% of new ESL students placed in ESL 117 or ESL 118, the two courses at the upper level of the ESL course sequence (Figure 3). By 2013, this percentage decreased to 44% of new students. In 2009, 8% of new students placed into ESL 114 or ESL 115, the two courses at the lower end of the ESL course sequence. By 2013, this percentage increased to 20% of new ESL students.

**Figure 3: Trends in the ESL Course Placement of New Undergraduates**

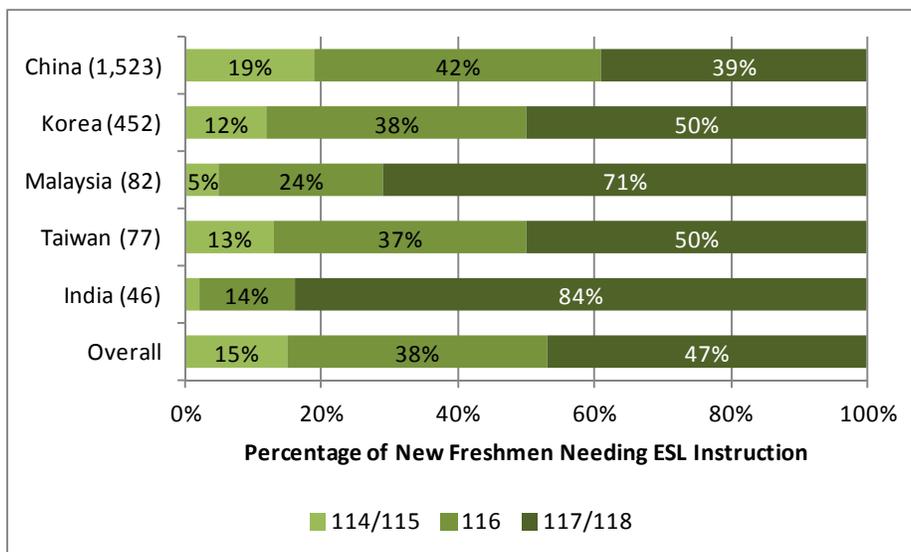


**New Freshmen**

Over the last five years, 2,491 new freshmen needing ESL instruction have enrolled at UW-Madison. Overall, 47% placed into ESL 117 or 118, 38% placed into ESL 116, and 15% placed into ESL 114 or 115 (Figure 4). Almost nine in ten new freshmen needing ESL instruction (88%) come from high schools in China, Korea, Malaysia, Taiwan, and India.

More than 60% of the new freshmen needing ESL instruction over the last five years have enrolled from high schools in China (1523 students). Compared to the overall distribution of ESL course placement, students from China disproportionately place into lower-level ESL courses. Thirty-nine percent (39%) place into ESL 117 or 118 (compared to 47% overall) and 19% place into ESL 114 or 115 compared to 15% overall.

**Figure 4: ESL Course Placement for New Freshmen, by Top Five Countries**



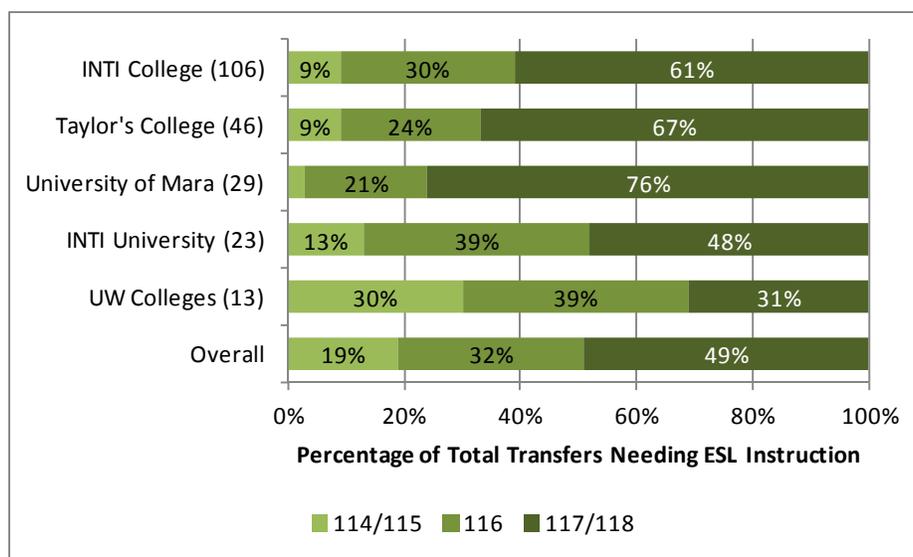
### **New Transfers**

Over the last five years 755 transfer students needing ESL instruction have enrolled at UW-Madison. Overall 49% placed into ESL 117 or 118, 32% placed into ESL 116, and 19% placed in ESL 114 or 115 (Figure 5). Unlike new freshmen where 87% of ESL students come from the top five countries, only 29% of new transfer ESL students come from the top five sending institutions. Over the last five years, these ESL transfer students have enrolled from more than 320 different sending institutions. This diversity of sending institutions makes it more difficult to analyze trends for transfer students.

There are some differences in ESL course placement that can be observed based on the most common sending institutions. The highest number of ESL transfer students over the last five years enrolled from INTI College (106 students) in Malaysia. A higher-than-average proportion of these students place into ESL 117 or 118 (61%) compared to the overall percentage (49%). Only 9% placed into ESL 114 or 115 compared to 19% overall. Transfer students enrolling from Taylor's College in Australia and the University of Mara, also in Malaysia, also have higher-than-average rates of placement into upper level ESL courses. These institutions have focused ESL programs for non-native English speakers.

Over the last five years there have been 13 ESL students enrolling from the UW Colleges (most in the last two years). Thirty percent (30%) of these students place into ESL 114 or 115 and only 31% place into ESL 117 or 118. Although the numbers from the UW Colleges are thus far small, we know that there is growing interest in transferring to UW-Madison through this route. An increase in the number of students needing lower level ESL instruction will put further pressure on the ESL curriculum. This trend also calls into question whether the Guaranteed Transfer Admission program, which guarantees admission to graduates of the two-year UW Colleges, was intended to apply to non-resident students.

**Figure 5: ESL Course Placement for New Transfers, by Top Five Sending Institutions**



### Relationship Between TOEFL Scores and ESL Course Placement

ESL course administrators are interested in the relationship between two ESL tests, the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), used in the admission process, and the ESLAT used post-admission for course placement. Although the total number of new international students is a relatively strong gauge of the total number of seats needed in ESL courses, we don't have a mechanism until shortly before the start of the semester to gauge how many seats are needed in specific ESL courses. This makes staffing and curricular planning difficult. If a strong relationship between the TOEFL score and subsequent ESLAT test results exists, then this would allow for earlier planning and staffing of ESL course offerings based on the language proficiency of admitted students.

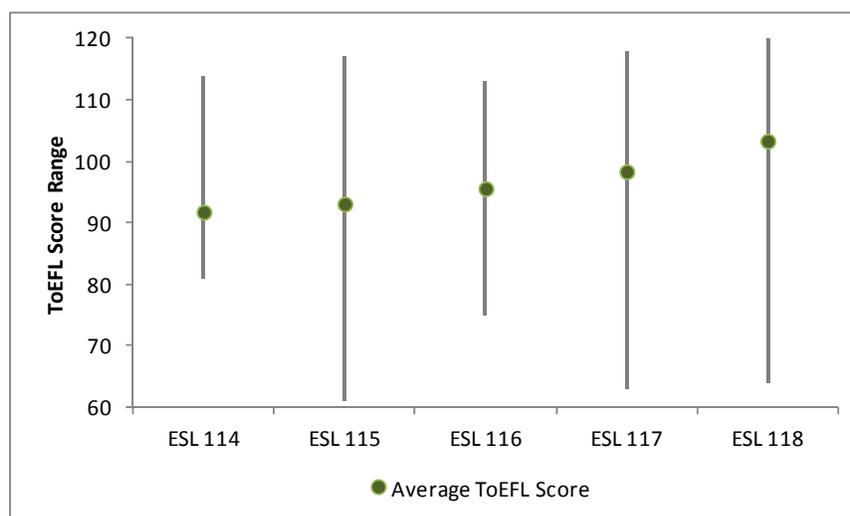
Undergraduate applicants whose native language is not English are generally required to submit scores from the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) examination to be considered as part of their application for admission. Most applicants now take the internet-based TOEFL examination where scores range from 60-120. Most students who are admitted to UW-Madison have scores in the 95-105 range.

Unfortunately, there is not a strong relationship between TOEFL scores and subsequent ESLAT scores (Figure 6). Students who place into higher level ESL courses do have higher average TOEFL scores. Students who placed into ESL 114, the lowest ESL course, had an average TOEFL score of 92 compared to the average TOEFL score of 103 for students who placed into ESL 118, the highest ESL course placement. However, the range of TOEFL scores for each ESLAT score almost completely overlap, making predictions of ESLAT placement based on TOEFL scores virtually impossible. The TOEFL score only predicts around 13% of the variance in ESLAT scores.

There are some known reasons why the TOEFL might not be a good predictor of ESLAT placement. The two tests do not test for the exact same things and there is usually a time difference between when a student takes the TOEFL (before application to college) and when they take the ESLAT (right before enrollment). Also, UW-Madison has a high standard for admission and does not typically admit students with low TOEFL scores. If we admitted students from the full range of TOEFL scores, we would expect to see a stronger relationship between the two tests.

Ultimately, this means that the anticipated number of new international students, along with information about their country of origin, is still the best predictor for curricular planning.

**Figure 6: Range and Average of TOEFL Scores by ESLAT Placement**



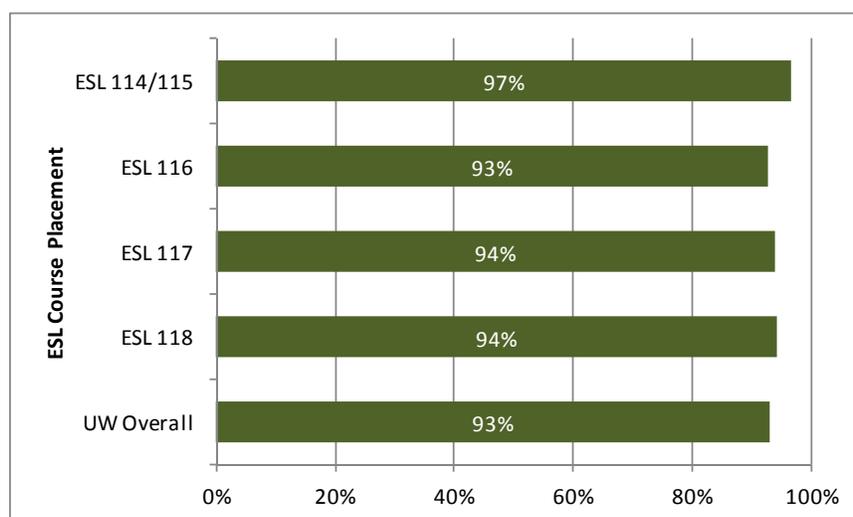
## Retention and Graduation Rates for ESL Students who Start as New Freshmen

### Retention

Second-year retention rates, the percentage of new freshmen who start in a fall cohort who are still enrolled one fall later, is a common national outcome metric. This is an early indication of progress to graduation and evidence that students have successfully navigated the challenges of the first year of college.

Overall at UW-Madison, 93% of new freshmen are retained to the 2<sup>nd</sup> year (Figure 7). New freshmen who are placed into ESL courses are retained at the same, or higher, rates. Lower-level ESL students are retained at the same, or higher, rates as other new freshmen.

**Figure 7: 2<sup>nd</sup> Year Retention Rates for New Freshmen**



Note: Retention rates are a 3-year weighted average of retention rates from Fall 2010-2012.

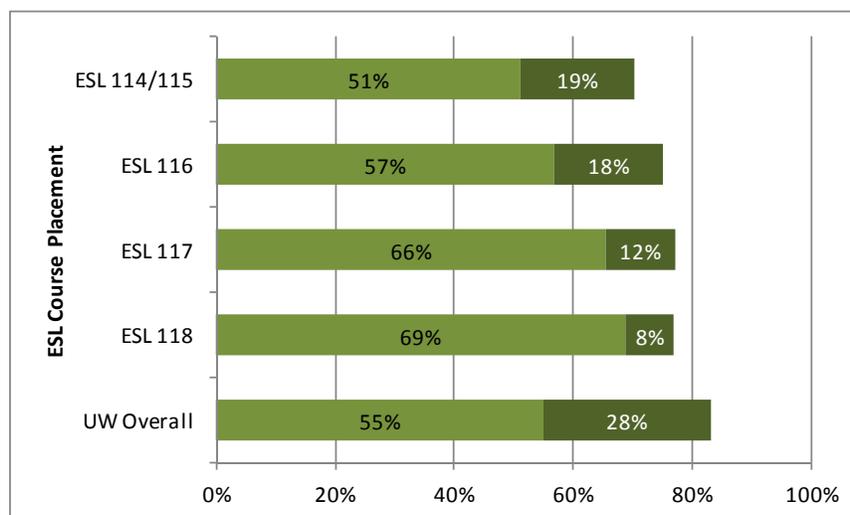
### Graduation

Graduation rates measure the percentage of an entering cohort who graduate within a specific time period, typically four and six years. Overall, 83% of UW-Madison new freshmen graduate within 6 years - 55% within 4 years and an additional 28% by the sixth year (Figure 8). Six-year graduation rates for new freshmen placed into ESL courses are slightly lower – ranging from 77% for new freshmen in ESL 117 and 118 to 70% for 114/115.

Even though six-year graduation rates are lower than those of the overall new freshman cohort, the four-year graduation rates of ESL students are generally higher. Overall, 55% of new freshmen graduate within four years (a figure that multiple ongoing efforts are trying to improve). ESL students who place into ESL 118 have a 69% four-year graduation rate and new freshmen in ESL 117 have a 66% four-year graduation rate, more than ten percentage points higher than the overall UW-Madison average.

New freshmen placed into lower level ESL courses have lower six-year graduation rates than students placed into higher level ESL courses. However, the four-year graduation rates for lower level ESL students are similar to the overall UW-Madison four-year rate of 55%. Lower-level ESL students who graduate are more likely to graduate in years five and six rather than within four years. Higher-level ESL students who graduate, are more likely to graduate in four years.

**Figure 8: 4 and 6-Year Graduation Rates for New Freshmen**



Note: Graduation rates are a 3-year weighted average of graduation rates from Fall 2005-2007.

The fact that a high percentage of ESL students are retained to the 2<sup>nd</sup> year and graduate in a timely manner is a testament to the quality and applicability of their English instruction and support at UW-Madison. Even with the challenges of studying their non-native language, ESL students do well at UW-Madison.

There are other characteristics of ESL students, almost all international students, which may offset some of the challenges of studying in a non-native language. International students are required to enroll on a full-time basis and need to stay enrolled in order to maintain their visas which allow them to study in the U.S. Our other research related to predictors of academic success (retention and graduation) show that enrolling full-time and maintaining continuous enrollment are positive factors that contribute to success at UW-Madison. In other words, requirements for international students force the very behavior that is known to correlate with positive academic outcomes.

Before international students are issued a student visa in the first place, they are required to have demonstrated that they have enough money to pay their full costs for at least a year. Some of the financial barriers that cause domestic students to enroll part-time, work longer hours that interfere with study time, and stop out of school are less of an issue for international students.