

Helping International Students with Academic Transition

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Faculty and members of administration in US higher education often view and address challenges faced by international students with English language proficiency as the focus of support. Essentially arguing that that challenge may be just a symptom of other difficulties during academic transition to a new academic culture, this handout provides a list of practical tips to ease that transition and enhance success.

ENCOURAGE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS TO LEARN ABOUT THE BIG PICTURE

Explain why: International students may find it harder to understand the educational objectives or long-term value of assignments and activities; for instance, not knowing why a class is seemingly trying to “find faults” in a reading can seem confusing and discouraging to a new student who was taught to respect authors. In fact, explaining the value of courses and programs in the overall context of undergraduate/graduate education can improve international students’ engagement and motivation.

Explain how: Be also explicit about how to complete tasks/projects. When students are expected to be self-directed—for instance, if an assignment is open-ended—making this expectation clear can help int’l students perform much better.

Encourage expressing opinion: For a variety of reasons, new students may be reluctant to join discussions. Create opportunities that value their experiences and opinions (in class and in assignments) so they don’t have to wait too long to gain the confidence. Shift the terms of engagement whereby they too seem knowledgeable, valued, etc, in relation to their domestic counterparts.

Encourage asking questions: Students from different backgrounds may view differently the acts of asking questions and seeking support with professors (after class, via email, during office hours). Tell class that you appreciate questions in and beyond class.

Help with social adaptation: Many int’l students start by maintaining the same kind of distance with teachers here as they did back home; but when trying to switch to whatever they think is the “American way,” some may end up seeming rude or disrespectful (or too polite). For instance, when a professor asks students to address her by first name, some int’l students may also start treating the professor like a friend! I tell my class that while students can use my first name, I don’t want them to call me “hey!”

Use critical framing: While encouraging int’l students to build on their prior knowledge, skills, and perspectives can boost their confidence, we shouldn’t assume that they are knowledgeable, right, or nuanced about topics related to their background. So, challenge them to think critically and to situate/relate their learning in/to academic and other contexts here (if needed).

Remember that “more” life may be happening with them: Many issues that aren’t academic—time and stress management, making friends and re-establishing a social support system of some sort, knowing where to go when there are problems—can severely affect int’l students’ academic performance. Offer feasible support, directing them to appropriate places for additional help.

Provide additional info: On the course site, provide links to useful resources online (and discuss key issues in class). Here is a very [useful booklet](#) titled *US Classroom Culture* by NAFSA; [this page](#) at usnews.com provides some simple guidelines for how to participate in class discussion; and [this one](#) on the same site describes the “system” more generally.

HELPING THEM LEARN NEW ACADEMIC TERMS/CONCEPTS AND PRACTICES

Define terms, concepts: Int’l students may not understand basic academic terminology and, more significantly, the implicit assumptions/expectations that come with the terms. For instance, some of them may not realize that they’re supposed to do the “readings” *before* coming to class, until they are told! Here is a good [glossary](#) of academic terms used in US university.

Provide context: Make explicit any discipline-specific writing conventions, such as what counts as evidence or new knowledge, how/whether to express opinion or analyze texts, why review/critique scholarship, etc.

Mind “world” Englishes: Some students will not understand “quiz” (meaning “test”), “conference” as “meeting,” “faculty” as “teachers” (not “academic disciplines”), and “campus” as the physical space (not the “college”), and your class may be the only place where they could learn about such differences. Also prompt students to educate each other.

Show how to borrow and build on others’ ideas: Learning is an individual endeavor in most places, but the notion of “ownership” of ideas can confuse int’l students from many backgrounds, leading to poor use of sources and anxiety about what ideas are worth expressing and how. Design activities and assignments that extend from summarizing to taking intellectual positions to acknowledging others’ ideas. Explain rationales (of developing intellectual positions, giving others credit).

Look beyond “honesty”: Int’l students don’t plagiarize due to dishonesty or even ignorance any more than domestic students; research shows that they resort to shortcuts when they’ve run out of time, are unable to read fast/well enough, can’t do the right research or overcome stress/homesickness, don’t value required courses, etc. Help students deal with the underlying causes and inspire them to develop their own voices/ideas. Extensions, referrals, peer review, and offer of support some useful strategies.

TEACHING THEM “ABOUT” ASSIGNMENTS AND PROJECTS

Explain syllabus, schedule, assignments: The “hidden curriculum” is the most significant here. Not just the practice/genre of instructor-created syllabus, schedule, and assignments but even what these terms mean can take a lot of time to understand. But simply discussing course policies, assignments, and schedule a little more explicitly can greatly benefit all students.

Teach study skills: What looks like a struggle with writing could just be a symptom. Teach students how to find sources, read them quickly and purposefully, annotate and cite them effectively, spot and emulate writing strategies, organize ideas, etc. Slow and careful reading is ideal, but it may be a recipe for disaster for students who are struggling to manage time, stress, and confidence.

Discuss writing & research: In many academic systems around the world, writing is largely used as a means of assessment, rather than a mode of learning/exploring new ideas and communicating one’s own thoughts. Many int’l students may not have done research the way students here might have. Do a quick demo, invite a librarian, or send students to the library and the writing center.

Provide samples: Int’l students may know little about the genres of writing (report, reflection, analysis, etc) or even what a “paper” looks like and how it’s organized (what introductions should contain, what sections to include, etc). Provide a sample or two and discuss strengths/weaknesses in relation to what your assignment demands. Emulating strategies is a better start than failure and frustration; strategies for reading, writing, organizing, and formatting texts are shared conventions/practices anyway.

Avoid shorthand: Int’l students may not understand the language used for providing feedback (esp. shorthand such as “awk”), signals used for drawing attention, and even non-directive comments and questions. Be explicit and encourage students to ask for clarity.

Be mindful about difference in body language: It’s hard not to assume our body language to be universal, but doing so can undermine teaching/learning and also teacher-student relationship. Students from South Asia, for instance, may shake their heads to say, “Of course”! Others may sit on the edge of their seat to show respect to you! Ask. Teach when you can. Discuss in class.

CHALLENGING THEM TO MEET THE SAME STANDARDS, USING REALISTIC APPROACHES

Accommodation: Int’l students may need accommodation, besides additional academic support; however, they should be held to the same rigorous standards that domestic students are held to. Especially when a student starts seeking leniency in place of help with fulfilling learning objectives, teachers should be aware. Make this clear at the outset, alongside offer of support.

High standards: On the other hand, do not focus on their weaknesses and create unnecessary pressure. For instance, don’t focus on grammatical correctness or accuracy of another types to the point of halting a student’s learning process. See if language is breaking down because the student hasn’t sufficiently understood the assignment, researched/read enough, learned rhetorical concepts involved, and spent enough time to develop ideas. Don’t assess something you haven’t taught or assign undue credit/penalty for it.

ALERTING THEM ABOUT VARIATIONS, COMPLEXITIES

Warn against generalization: New students, like tourists, seek simple/generalized ideas and strategies to survive and succeed (“What do ‘Americans’...?” “How do professors...?”). While often useful (e.g., US academic writing generally favors frontloading of thesis statement), doing so obscures the fact that, for instance, even within the same department/discipline, teachers, courses, expectations may be unique. Imagine that you’re the first professor to teach the students this basic reality—and you could be right quite often.

Use examples & analogies cautiously: Int’l students may lack the knowledge of references, analogies, and metaphors that you use for making complex issues *more* accessible! Be careful, and encourage students to ask when your explanation is not clear.

Create two-way traffic: Design assignments and activities to utilize the knowledge, experiences, skills, and perspectives of both domestic and int’l students. Encourage multiple perspectives to enhance critical thinking, enrich classroom conversations, and improve learning for all students. Treat and encourage domestic students as international/global citizens as well, respecting their perspectives and knowledge (and their needs and desires to learn about the world) so that everyone is valued in class.

Students are unique: It’s tempting to find general (if not magic) solutions, and I may have got very close to doing so in this handout! But visa status, even when students go by it, tells us less and less about their identity, language proficiency, and academic background and caliber. While there may be general patterns or possibilities, intersectionalities and individual differences weaken easy heuristics. The range of student needs also extends beyond what we are able/trained to do or have the time for. But if we encourage students to seek support with us and with the right people/places on campus, provide them the time resources that we can with an awareness of possible struggles, and are seen as committed to all students’ success, students can become powerful agents in their success. Because even the most talented and resilient student can lose some bearings during major transitions, even the most basic of teaching strategies (like these) can make a big difference—and each of us, in any department, has a role to play.