

## Challenges of International Students and Strategies for Success

*International Students Luncheon Discussion*

*January 29, 2014*

### Questions for students:

1. Please describe some of the major cultural differences that you have noticed since you have been at UCSB—first, in the social context; and then in the academic context.
2. What are the top three challenges or barriers to success that you face as an international student on this campus? (Are there additional challenges or barriers?)
3. Please share some of your strategies for success as an international graduate student. Are there additional strategies that you have used, or that you can think of, to overcome the challenges and barriers that you have faced (as you described earlier)?
4. Share some positive experiences that you've had as an international student.

### Questions for faculty:

1. As a faculty member, what are your major challenges of interacting with international students?
2. As faculty, what aspects do you find refreshing about working with international students?
3. What are the top three challenges or barriers to success that you observe in international students on this campus? Additional challenges or barriers?
4. Do you have suggestions for strategies (at the individual/personal, department, school or campus level) for international students to overcome their challenges and barriers?

### Student responses:

1. Please describe some of the major cultural differences that you have noticed since you have been at UCSB—first, in the social context; and then in the academic context.
  - **Socially**
    - Students have noticed differences interpreting and responding to greetings. For example, people who ask “how are you?” often do not actually want to know how you are doing. Also, greetings such as “how is it going” are not readily interpretable (how is *what* going?).
    - There is confusion about politeness conventions (e.g., how to address people).
    - There are differences in time dedicated to socializing and leisure time. For some students, there is less time dedicated to social activities in the U.S., compared to

life in their home country. People in the U.S. seem very busy; there is hardly any vacation time, and people are expected to work at home.

- Other social conventions: hugging seems commonplace in the U.S. but not always in students' home countries. Students wonder when they are supposed to hug. One student came up with a system to hug American friends and other international friends but not her Chinese friends.
  - American students' interactions with parents are different (e.g., they hug and say "I love you") and lead international students to wonder if they should do the same with their parents despite the practice being unusual in their culture.
  - UCSB is known to be a party school.
  - Potlucks are common, even in class. Students found this to be a nice idea and found that they are learning to cook, sometimes learning by observing their roommates cook.
  - Relationships between professors and students are different. Students wondered if it is appropriate to invite professors to social events or if it is common to be invited to professors' homes.
- **Academically**
    - Discussions are prominent. A lot of class time is devoted to students sharing ideas and perspectives. In China, classes are more focused on lecture, often even in Masters programs. Finding something to say in class is difficult, and their learning habits have had to change.
    - Language fluency is also an issue that makes speaking in class difficult.
    - In the U.S., they feel they can have a peer relationship with their advisors and are treated like colleagues. They do not need to be as deferential as they would at home. Advisors in the U.S. are also more focused on helping students uncover their own interests (i.e., more guided exploration), rather than telling the students what to study.

2. What are the top three challenges or barriers to success that you face as an international student on this campus? (Are there additional challenges or barriers?)

- **Language and communication across all contexts**
- **Financial** – have to contend with non-resident fees
- **Loneliness** – as they are away from friends and family
- **Overwhelmed by opportunities** – there is so much information to digest
- **Less support than accustomed**

There is not much interaction with faculty or peer groups. They would like more suggestion and feedback and social connection with faculty.
- **Knowledge of accessing research resources**

In China, students were aware of ongoing projects to which they may be assigned. They did not need to contact schools and other research sites on their own. It was easier to find research sites because of connections in their social network.
- **Networking**

Students recognize this as an important skill; they want to build a network. Yet, at the same time, they need to focus on research and publishing papers.

3. Please share some of your strategies for success as an international graduate student. Are there additional strategies that you have used, or that you can think of, to overcome the challenges and barriers that you have faced (as you described earlier)?
  - **Strategies for success:**
    - Watch television to improve communicative strategies
    - Make friends with native speakers and make an effort to mingle with non-Chinese students. They try to find common interests with classmates.
    - Participate in GGSE activities and go to parties
    - Identify with each other over common Ph.D. goals
    - Work on time management. Scheduling is important. They have noticed that American students look so busy (e.g., making Google calendars and color-coding events).
    - Google-translating materials. Advisors suggested skimming readings, but this is difficult because students have to look up definitions for unknown words. Google translate is faster.
  - **Goals:**
    - Happy healthy life! Enjoy the resources in Santa Barbara
    - Common problem of gaining weight in their first year; the food is different and plentiful. They are given a lot, and they don't want to waste it. They combat this problem by buying scales and visiting the recreation center.
  
4. Share some positive experiences that you've had as an international student.
  - **Most experiences have been positive!**
  - **Courses have been helpful**  
The methodology courses have especially helped them build a solid foundation.
  - **University housing**  
Students love university housing. Family housing is affordable, and has good management. San Clemente has nice social events.
  - **Mentoring**  
One student described how helpful it was that her advisor paired her with a more advanced "mentor" student before her arrival. The mentor helped with course selection and gave advice about how to balance her workload.

### **Faculty responses:**

1. As a faculty member, what are your major challenges of working with international students?
  - **Help seeking behaviors**  
There are individual differences in help seeking behaviors. Some international students are willing to take the initiative to approach faculty members to ask for help. Yet a majority of international students appear to keep their struggles to themselves and seldom let the faculty know that they are struggling.
  - **Different communication styles and customs**

*Professor Yuqin Hei (a visiting scholar from China):* In my home country, we do not have office hours. As faculty members we do not have official time to interact with international students outside of the classroom. I have observed a lot of differences in communication style and custom between the Chinese faculty and many international students in China. I am often afraid I might say or do something to offend or discourage international students without knowing it. I try my best to be careful and cautious about what I teach. For example, I avoid using some taboo words such as pigs and pork when interacting with students who come from Arabic countries. Here in the U.S., my guess is that many American faculty members experience Asian students as mysterious. Yet there are no books describing ways to deal with this type of challenge.

- **Language issues**

Especially at the doctoral level, if their English skills are not good, international students may feel uncomfortable, particularly in group settings. Some additional issues:

- Excellent reading and writing skills perhaps do not always equate to oral English skills.
- Some of the international students may speak well, but may miss things from conversation, including vocabulary: “There are just so many layers.”
- Often our expressed language is very colloquial.
- Sometimes a professor may give instructions – “Do this task in class, come back in 5 minutes and we’ll discuss it.” Differences in time to process or translate information may put students on the spot.
- Time to complete studies could be very different.
- Some international students may be in disbelief about writing errors.

- **Funding issues**

One of the biggest challenges of working with international students is related to funding. Despite many faculty members’ good intention and effort to help students get funding, not every graduate student can get an RA- or TA-ship unless there are multi-million dollar grants available to fund students. Since international students are paying non-resident tuitions, it is important to make sure that every student is aware of this and understands other financial aspects of their studies in the U.S. before they come here. If they are interested in attending a specific academic program, some students still come here to study without any funding. However, what often happens is that once they are here and become knowledgeable about the funding other students are getting, they change their expectation and expect to get some sort of funding also. Therefore, it is important to help students to have clear expectations about the funding issues before and after they arrive in the U.S. In cases where students choose to come without funding, it might be helpful to stress that there is no guarantee of funding at all after they come.

Additional issues:

- International students tend to underestimate the expenses involved for their studies here.
- Moreover, international students holding an RA- or TA-ship can get an in-state tuition, which creates different levels of equality among international students.
- Finally, domestic students and international students are treated differently. For example, domestic students from a state outside of California can pay in-state tuition after living in California for one year while international students pay out-

of-state tuition throughout their studies here except for those holding an RA- or TA-ship.

- **Educational differences**

- Understanding what the students need is important, but this is more difficult with international students. They sometimes need help to balance a quiet voice vs. an overly demanding voice when seeking help.
- They often do not go to the teacher with questions.
- Academic background – here, students take math classes that they may also have had experience in their home country, but other classes are more difficult or socio/cultural challenges are more difficult.
- Students know they have a number of pathways to a target university. They may go to another university and then transfer. Their assumption is that all pathways are equal. For example, some students think that SBCC would be a good link, but sometimes classes might be online and very different.
- Academic integrity – there are differences in what is expected.
- Curriculum adjustment
- Hard to anticipate differences
- International students in an English class still often have little exposure to jargon.

2. As faculty, what aspects do you find refreshing about working with international students?

- **Diversity**

International students come from diverse backgrounds. They have been educated in different social, cultural, and academic contexts. Working with international students helps us faculty grow as scholars. It helps us learn so much about what is happening in other parts of the world. It feels like you were travelling around the world.

- **Different perspectives**

- Professors may learn about the students' previous education systems.
- Professors may learn other cultural or political perspectives.
- This learning can help those in contact with international students to go beyond basic stereotypes.
- Professors can learn the art of asking questions in a positive way that does not come across as judgmental. Often international students have a certain pride that they want to defend.
- When questioning how others perceive us, professors get a chance to observe themselves.
- When they give a lecture they also expand their thinking and/or explanation and may challenge some of their own assumptions about what they are teaching.

- **Inspiration and reward**

Many international students are more motivated and determined to do well academically than their domestic peers. It is encouraging and rewarding to see young scholars trying their best to overcome all the barriers. We can learn a lot from them.

- **Respectful** – this is good, but students maybe do not always spontaneously offer information

3. What are the top three challenges or barriers to success that you observe in international students on this campus? Additional challenges or barriers?

- **English language difficulty**
  - Many international students struggle with the English language. Reading a lot of materials within a short period of time is especially challenging. Many technical or academic terms or phrases sound foreign or unfamiliar to them
  - There is a real need for assistance in writing, getting feedback and perfecting general language skills.
- **Challenge of adapting to a new educational system that is so different from what they are familiar with**
- **Getting students to engage with other cultural groups is sometimes difficult, but everyone can benefit from these types of interaction.**

4. Do you have suggestions for strategies (at the individual/personal, department, school or campus level) for international students to overcome their challenges and barriers?

- **To address financial concerns:**
  - Help students become aware of opportunities to get TA- or RA-ships in other academic departments
  - Waive the tuition and fees for RA's and TA's employed by the department
  - Look for external scholarships such as those offered by the government of the student's country of origin
- **To ensure adequate recruitment of suitable students:**

When recruiting international students, it would be helpful to coach them through the entire application and interview procedure by emailing them detailed, relevant information. In the screening process, it might be important to conduct phone, Skype, or onsite interviews to make appropriate evaluation of the student's qualifications and readiness to study in a specific program. A student's test scores usually do not tell us everything. Enrolling unqualified students will create big problems for the both students and faculty.
- **To address communication issues:**

Some international students say "yes" to everything. As faculty, we are not sure if they really mean it when they say "yes." It might be helpful to check if they really understand what you say and have them repeat what you say.
- **To address issues related to students' help-seeking behavior:**
  - It would be helpful if faculty make active efforts to earn students' trust, to break the wall between students and us, to build trusting relationships with students, and to figure out how to get students to come to us for help
  - It is important to consider cultural differences when we communicate with students or display our concern for them.
- **To address English language difficulty:**
  - Provide bilingual services
  - Provide language programs to help students enhance their English language proficiency

- Assign them a writing tutor or refer them to campus units or departments that offer writing programs to help students improve their writing
- **To address adjustment issues:**
  - Offer more orientation and classes such as ED 20 to help student adjust to American educational system and college life
    - Perhaps a separate orientation class for graduate students
    - Or a section/lab for non-native English speakers
  - Use buddy/mentor programs and/or student tutor programs.