

My Experience as a Foreign Student*

Center Note: Many students participate at our Center as part of their experiences at UCLA.* Some come to the university from other countries. Enisa Adil came to the campus from Albania. As part of her time with the Center, she chose to do a personal project focusing on the challenges confronting international students. The following is what she wrote (with some edits).

Recent data show there were about 1.1 million international students in the United States of America (U.S.) in 2018. That is 24% of all international students enrolled worldwide, not counting immigrant students.

I came to the United States in 2015 after finishing the 10th grade level in my country of origin, Albania. There, I experienced both public and private schools, whereas in the U.S. I went to two public high schools, Wolcott High School in Wolcott, Connecticut and Westwood High School in Austin, Texas. After a period of considerable “culture shock”, I was surprised by how differently the material was taught and organized, not only between different countries, but between different states and schools within the United States.

In my experience, instructors in the U.S. had considerably less authority, a less supervisory role and less involvement in both their student’s work and life. In addition, schools favored classroom discussions compared to lectures, projects focused on teamwork rather than independent learning, and grades were kept private despite there being a yearly-updated ranking system. Although I was fluent in English, I was unfamiliar with the academic jargon in the language. I had little experience with the way the material was delivered and even less experience with standardized multiple choice tests. Needless to say, the first year, my grades suffered. While I did experience culture shock and social isolation for a considerable period of time, my main source of stress was my inability to adapt to the academic settings. I had to relearn how to study, how to acquire knowledge, and how to deliver it in an appropriate manner.

These sentiments and experiences are shared by many international and immigrant students I have met and spoken to over the years. Particularly noted was the difference between educational systems abroad compared to U.S. as a primary cause of lower student performance and achievement. That is why I wanted to do a paper on the academic barriers foreign students face and suggest how teachers and institutions can better support students in crossing these barriers.

Academic Barriers in the Transition Process

Transition programs that support foreign students are relatively successful in tertiary education. Colleges and universities receive better funding and usually address education on a global scale. In U.S. universities, foreign students can find education on par with international standards and also experience student and learning supports through specialized counselors, as well as from students who are open minded and welcoming.

It is different for K-12 education. With the exception of the more affluent schools, most schools are ill-prepared to receive and support foreign students.

Periods of transition and student mobility, especially across country lines, are emotionally charged and can lead to acute stress and at times depression. In addition, students encounter language barriers, especially where a diverse and high level vocabulary and cultural understanding of the American English language is required (e.g., in the humanities and science courses).

*The national *Center for MH in School & Student/Learning Supports* is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project, Dept. of Psychology, UCLA. Website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu> . Send comments to ltaylor@ucla.edu

Other barriers stem from such matters as the following:

Limited Orientations. A comprehensive orientation can be a significant step in addressing initial concerns and form the foundation for a successful transition. K-12 schools often provide little to no significant orientation that addresses the specific concerns of foreign students. Some schools provide groups tours for all incoming freshmen; some offer pamphlets or brochures; others (usually smaller and less-funded schools) provide no introductory experience for newcomers. The lack of an effective orientation contributes to academic and emotional insecurity.

Course Credit and Grading Differences. Most U.S. schools do not accept class credits from foreign schools. When accepted, the number of credits recognized varies widely from school to school and often depends on country of origin. As a result, foreign students are often left with no choice but to drop down one or two grade levels in order to have a 4-year GPA before graduation. Furthermore, not all schools offer foreign students the chance to test out of certain classes or move up a grade through testing. In addition, foreign students may be unfamiliar with the grading system. Many schools do not offer such students practical advice on how to succeed in the system.

Matriculation Readiness. The transition from one grade to another is often difficult for any student (and their parents). Matriculation can be especially difficult for students whose experience in their country of origin allowed them not to change their class group. In such cases, making an adjustment to new classmates every year can be confusing and especially stressful. In addition, foreign students may experience an “elapse” to their allotted time due to having to face a new environment, with new teachers and classmates.

Instruction and Learning Styles. Due to the decentralized nature of education in the U.S., a student may experience a variety of teaching approaches. This makes it difficult to adapt for foreign students whose experience is rooted in a different style (e.g., independent learning rather than team projects). And any academic support programs that are available tend not to be keyed to foreign students. As a result, many foreign students stumble through their first few months having to unlearn years of study habits with little to no support.

Standardized Testing. Even if a foreign student acclimatizes quickly to how teaching and learning are done in the U.S., they still have to adapt to new *testing* methods. Many are unfamiliar with the test formatting and find content culturally incompatible. It is often said that a student becomes better at standardized testing through practice and experience; the lack of familiarity with the tests leaves foreign students at a disadvantage in comparison to their domestic peers.

In general, most K-12 schools have limited supports for foreign students. Mental health services are especially limited. *English as a Second Language* programs often are inadequate. Events that help foreign students connect with their peers are rare, and few schools facilitate the involvement of foreign students' families or help engage them in their communities for purposes of enrichment. The lack of effective supports to address barriers to learning contributes to poor student (and family) integration or assimilation.

How Can Schools Better Support Foreign Students?

The unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports developed by Adelman and Taylor provides a framework for addressing barriers to learning and teaching. It categorizes arenas for ongoing support, four of which are adapted here to address barriers foreign students experience.

(a) *Transition Supports for Students.* Student mobility, especially for international students, affects a wide variety of living and health conditions, which in turn affects their academic achievement. To facilitate successful transition of any newcomer, schools need personalized forms of welcoming and orientation for students and their families and strategies for connecting them to social supports (e.g., “buddy” programs). For both academic and emotional support, individual

counseling can help address the concerns of students from countries with significantly different values and traditions. Of course, for most students, initial transition support is just a first step. Ongoing peer mentor/ buddy programs help connect students with others and with a variety of activities (e.g., recreational, enrichment, academic, volunteer, work opportunities).

(b) *Learning Supports in the Classroom.* The purposes of classroom-based supports are to prevent and respond quickly to problems. This is accomplished by bringing in student support staff and community and student volunteers to collaborate with the teacher and enhancing their understanding of the needs of foreign students.

(c) *Family Involvement and Engagement.* Families migrating to the U.S. need a variety of supports in order to be supportive of their children's schooling. These families may be having difficulty coping not only with the transition, but with matters that arise about residency status, language, work, cultural differences, discrimination, and more. In response, schools focusing on supporting such families have programs that provide information and connect them with families who have made successful transitions. Some schools have developed linkages with community health, social, and legal services; some districts offer language, vocational, and other adult courses. As families are able to devote increasing attention to their children's schooling, the usual mechanisms that facilitate home-school communication are likely to be more effective.

In contrast to migrating families, international and exchange students usually are unaccompanied by parents when they study abroad. Although parents or other guardians may regularly visit or speak with the youngster, many of these students are relatively unsupervised and isolated from parental guidance and care. In such cases, a variety of school-based supports can counter potential problems and help students cope with those that arise. Examples include support and guidance related to living arrangements, safety and security, management of finances, and generally dealing with their newfound independence. Mutual support groups and mentor programs seem especially relevant.

(d) *Support through Community Outreach.* Community outreach can facilitate successful transition, increase opportunities, and help enhance a foreign student's bonding with school and community. This can reduce social isolation, provide opportunities for socio-emotional development, enhance success at school, and help students in choosing a post graduate path. Community outreach by the school also can attract and link to additional resources that support and enrich the lives of foreign students.

Concluding Comments

Research has identified the main barriers to school success for international, immigrant and exchange students. Various schools have developed programs which address many of these interfering factors. What remains to be done is to expand the system of supports and implement such a system on a wider scale throughout the U.S. so that foreign students make successful transitions and obtain equity of opportunity for success at school with their domestic peers.

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