



# International Affairs

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO  
**COLORADO SPRINGS**

**Date Published: May 7, 2012**

A [survey conducted in 2011](#) by three researchers from different institutions confirmed that while most international students feel welcomed and at home on their college campuses, many have a low sense of belonging in the US generally and face challenges in making the transition to American culture. These same students voice concern over the lack of support from the institution in making that transition.

One student remarked about the international student services available, "The office helped in all administrative matters, but nothing more. Please, do not get me wrong: they were very helpful, but they did not help in my transition from Mexican to American culture." Other students cited feelings of isolation and culture shock, as well as difficulties adjusting to the social expectations of the American classroom.

The survey results, though taken from a small sample, raise the question: as colleges and universities enroll more international students, what steps can they take to ensure that their growing population of international students have the peer support and services needed to aid them in acculturation and academic success?

While international students often come to your institution with an impressive student record, they face significant obstacles in the transition:

- Differing cultural expectations around student/faculty roles, intellectual property and knowledge-sharing, and the nature of academic research
- Gaps in preparedness for academic writing in English
- Difficulties in acculturation not just on campus but in the surrounding community, so that international students do not feel isolated in ways that negatively impact academic performance or student development

For advice, we turned to Darla Deardorff, executive director of the Association of International Education Administrators and a research scholar in education at Duke University, and Norman Evans, a professor in Brigham Young University's linguistics department who is conducting a nationwide study of academic support services for international students.

## **Orientation**

Many of those institutions that admit large numbers of international students each year have begun offering orientations tailored to international students -- in the best examples, orientations that are in part designed and led by other international students.

Here are some guiding questions for developing an effective approach to international student orientation:

- Can you leverage peer leaders, selecting and training upperclassmen who are international students to lead an orientation for entering freshmen?
- What resources can you offer online? What makes sense to convey to students via a video tutorial, for instance, and at what points in the process?
- If your institution is investing in growing its international student population from a given region, does it make sense to invest in a pre-arrival orientation held in the students' home country, "meeting them where they are" to help prepare them for the transition?

## **Thinking More Holistically about the Transition to Campus Life**

"It's not enough to just provide orientation and give them the basics," Deardorff cautions. "We need to look beyond orientation -- how do we continue to meet their needs once the 'honeymoon period' has worn off? Getting used to a new culture and a new academic system can be quite challenging."

Deardorff recommends reviewing:

- Are your student life and student development programs -- those aimed at helping students develop leadership, sound health and lifestyle choices, etc. -- inclusive of international students and their needs?
- What programs and events do you have in place to help all students, domestic and international, develop intercultural competencies?

Next, plan intentionally for integrating domestic and international students. Integration, if it is to be effective, means more than just living in the same residence halls and attending the same classes. It means more than holding an international or multicultural fair or festival. It means structuring and fostering meaningful interaction in academic learning and campus life. For example:

- Service projects over the break that include a mix of international and domestic undergraduates. A weekend-long service-learning project with a shared goal can help students who would not otherwise have interacted outside of class form lasting relationships.

- A departmental ambassador program for graduate students. Current graduate students volunteer to reach out to new international graduate students with invitations to departmental and community events, and to be available as resources.

### **Academic Support Throughout the Four Years**

Many international students face academic barriers, as well -- particularly with academic writing. A high TOEFL score may mean some proficiency with English, but it doesn't necessarily mean that students are prepared for the rigors and expectations of academic writing in North America.

Norman Evans of Brigham Young University is in the midst of conducting a survey of the 309 postsecondary institutions with the highest numbers of admitted international students (as cited in the most recent Open Doors report). Evans hopes to learn the extent to which these institutions pre-screen admits, screen arriving students, and offer academic support services tailored to the needs of international students throughout their student experience.

Speaking with nearly 30 years of experience in the profession, Evans offers these suggestions for institutions that are stepping up enrollment of international students for whom English is a second language:

- Provide a writing center or writing lab with tutorial staff who are trained to assist second-language students and who understand their challenges in developing fluency in academic writing
- Provide tutorials and workshops on universal design for your faculty
- Hold monthly brown-bag lunches and bring together those people on campus who regularly interact with and support international students to share challenges and opportunities -- and make sure to bring international students to those lunches to offer their perspective

Deardorff adds that one initiative that has seen some success at Duke University is to provide student-led workshops to help prepare faculty and staff to better support international students. The conceptual framework for the workshops is developed by the institution, and time is allotted within the sessions for international students to share their experiences transitioning to the campus, what they wish they'd known, what support they wish they'd had, and how staff and faculty can help them better.

*Courtesy of Academic Impressions, 2012*