



International Affairs

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO
COLORADO SPRINGS

The *Chronicle of Higher Education's* recent article "[The China Conundrum](#)" draws attention to the challenges both institutions of higher education and students from China are facing -- including not only language barriers and obstacles to the recruiting and enrollment process but also differing cultural expectations around student/faculty roles, intellectual property and knowledge-sharing, and the nature of academic research. The secondary education system in China is not designed to prepare students for an American university, and most students receive little pre-arrival preparation for integration into the American college experience.

While these differing expectations are increasingly well-documented, there has been little treatment of the broader issue of acculturation. International students pursuing an undergraduate degree in the US not only are participating in a new and challengingly different classroom experience; they are also living and adapting to a new country and a challengingly different surrounding culture -- with limited support in learning how to navigate American culture, establish social and professional friendships, or draw upon local and campus resources effectively. A [preliminary survey](#) conducted earlier this year by three researchers -- Peter Mather, an Ohio University assistant professor of higher education and student affairs; Bethany Schweitzer, a recent Ohio University doctoral graduate; and Gunter Morson, head of higher education and careers at England's CATS College -- 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 interesting questions. As more colleges and universities feeling the pressure of budget cuts make significant investments in recruiting and admitting 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?

This week, we interviewed John Leedock Jr., the immigration specialist and program coordinator for the International Programs Office at Benedictine University, to gather lessons learned from one institution that has made a strong commitment to educating international students.

Leedock recommends taking these steps:

- Offer an acculturation class, not just an orientation
- Engage in more intentional data collection during the admissions process, and use that data to inform the acculturation class and other services
- Cultivate international student leaders
- Where possible, leverage the support of the local community

The Acculturation Class

A pass/fail acculturation class for new students can help international students make the transition by providing support and feedback over the course of a term. More than just an orientation, a class can offer students space to work through different scenarios and to discuss challenges that arise in their classes or in the campus community. The class empowers students to persist and succeed by helping them work through cultural differences at the beginning. Leedock also recommends:

- Including "field trips," such as a trip downtown to an American restaurant to order a meal, or a visit to a networking event to illustrate the nuances of career and professional networking in US culture
- Providing an acculturation class for graduate students as well; as graduate students are more likely to live off campus and are likely to spend less time in the classroom, they may have a more difficult time transitioning than the undergraduates will (even though some graduate students will have more travel and work experience)

Data Collection

Leedock recommends collecting specific data during the admissions process, and then using this data to inform programming and support services. The acculturation class, for example, can be tailored to the needs of that incoming year.

Examples of data to collect include:

- Region of origin (not just the nation, but the region -- after all, China and India are vast and diverse countries)
- Likes/dislikes (similar to the data collected in a residence life application)

- How often the student has traveled
- Parents' level of education
- Expectations for the college experience

Cultivating International Student Leaders

The next step, Leedock advises, is to ensure that after the acculturation class, students have the ongoing support they need. One way to provide this is to find international students who have a natural ability to lead and who have progressed through the acculturation process more swiftly than most.

International student leaders can serve both as "go-to" people for other students, and as consultants for your design of programming and services for a given student demographic. Invite them to offer insights into the challenges incoming students face, and to provide feedback on your orientation or acculturation class, and on the resources you have been offering your international students.

Citing social network theory, Leedock suggests identifying an international student who functions not as a "node" with a few connections to other students, but as a "hub," well-connected throughout the student population. Additional indicators of a possible leader include:

- Competency in navigating US culture
- Facility with intercultural communication
- An extensive history of travel

Leveraging Local Support

Leedock notes that Benedictine University's students from India often acculturate more swiftly than their students from China; the reason is that Benedictine University is located in a community that has a high population of immigrants from India. The students already have a local support network. "In this case," Leedock notes, "the university can take a role that is more about providing information and resources than about providing counseling or more high-touch support."

To offer support to international students in transition efficiently and successfully, it is important to understand the demographics of your surrounding community, and to structure your acculturation effort accordingly. If there is a significant local community representing a region many of your international students come from, then you can take proactive steps to inform the community about the services you offer, and to share resources.

Courtesy of Academic Impressions, 2011