
FIRST PERSON

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The International Student Experience Studying in the USA: Tips for Students and Hosts

International students and the US educational system

For over a century, the United States has been a global leader in higher education, hosting more than a million international students a year, currently representing almost 5% of the total US enrollment. More than half of these international students are from Asia (predominantly China and India). International students contribute tremendously to the US economy through nearly 40 billion dollars in spending, supporting almost half a million US jobs (NAFSA, 2020). The tuition contributions from international students constitute almost 30% of the total revenue for US public universities. In 2015, the international student enrollment began to drop due to increased visa restrictions, and dropped again in 2020 after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, international students continue to seek higher education opportunities in the US despite current barriers to entry.

Experiences as a host to international students

My (JKM) first experience with international students was in my childhood, when my college professor

parents would host gatherings at our home each season for the international students on campus who could not go home for holidays and breaks. I asked my parents why they did this, and they impressed upon me the importance of being a good host to those who are far from home and that we were, in a way, ambassadors of our culture. When I became a US professor myself 20 years later, I witnessed a jump in the number of applications from international students seeking to study in the US. As I had been taught in my youth, it was important for me to be a good host to these students from abroad. I tried to spend time with them to understand their experiences and needs as they adjusted to this new learning environment.

Yet, I quickly learned that despite my best efforts, my inaccurate assumptions would sometimes get in the way. For example, when our program enrolled our first student from mainland China, I tried to make sure that she had adequate housing in our newest dormitory that featured up-to-date individual rooms with spacious amenities. I assumed that any student would enjoy a private living space. A few months into the term, I met with this student to check

in about how she was adapting. She confessed that, in reality, she found that she was lonelier than she had expected. When I asked why, she told me that she had never lived in a room by herself before and that it was overwhelming. She related that during her childhood, her family had smaller living quarters and she had become used to the feeling of connectedness this provided. She told me about her undergraduate studies in China, where it was common for eight students to share a row of bunk beds in a single room. I expressed my thoughts about how difficult this must have been for her, but she protested and said it was actually quite the opposite. She loved the connectedness and comradery with the other students. She said each night they would get ready for bed and turn the lights off at the same time. Yet they wouldn't go to sleep immediately. They would talk with each other in the dark about their experiences of the day as they drifted off to sleep. She told me it was like a daily group therapy session, and that she missed it tremendously. This taught me a valuable lesson, yet it was not the only time my inaccurate assumptions would get in the way.

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Following in my parents' footsteps, I also would host seasonal parties at my home during the campus holidays. I invited both international and national students to attend. We wanted to provide a place for any student who couldn't get home for the break, and hoped that interaction between the groups would be good. One year, a US student suggested we play a board game together, and they chose *Pictionary* from our stack of games. As the game progressed, I realized that the foundation of the game is based predominantly on US cultural assumptions and that most of the international students had little idea about the unique content of the game. Realizing the embarrassment of the situation, I suggested we try a more culturally neutral game that everyone could enjoy. I had many experiences like these in the years to come.

Tips from international students: In their own voice

These encounters taught me that I still had a lot to learn about being a good host to our international students. To get a better picture of this, I contacted several of my past international students and surveyed them about their experiences; how they were different from their expectations, struggles and coping strategies, and tips for other international students. Here are a few of the ideas they shared with me.

Logistics, routines, and cultural biases

Each of my respondents talked about the initial challenges of daily life. Seemingly trivial matters such as transportation, shopping, housing, phone service, internet, paying bills, and language barriers were listed by many as common struggles. While most new students struggle with some of these things, I got the idea that the international student difficulties were greatly magnified. Some of the respondents talked about how the educational procedures and classroom practices were very different than they expected or had been exposed to in their own country. For instance, in many Eastern educational environments emphasis is placed on order and hierarchy in the classroom, and debate and open discussion with the instructor and other students is rarer. Yet, most US classroom environments celebrate open discussion and debate in classes. Several international students explained how they had to grow accustomed to this new method of learning and how to find their own voice in the process. Another student told me about an assignment where the instructor had told students to turn in their work (that included a tape and a paper) in a Ziplock bag in order to keep it all together. She had no idea what a Ziplock bag was, or how to get one, and was surprised when all the other students seemed to immediately understand. Part of the struggle to

find her voice was mustering the courage to ask for clarification from the instructor. The surveyed students advised other international students to be bold and try to find confidence in themselves when finding their voice. They advised speaking up more in class even if they were not exactly sure of themselves. And finally, they advised to focus more on the "grounded learning" environment in US education instead of focusing on grades alone.

Other respondents talked about how their expectation of their studies in the US were largely formed by watching Western media such as *Friends*, yet their actual experience was far from what they had seen on TV. They talked about their surprise with the many cultures, languages, and general diversity of the US population. Their advice for other international students was to embrace this experience and dive into the opportunity to explore the broad range of cultures and make a wide variety of US friends instead of sticking to their own cultural groups.

Finally, all of the respondents indicated that while they were highly satisfied with their studies in the US and that they would return if they had it to do over again, one of the greatest challenges was separation from their families. They advised other international students to spend time with family before they leave and create a ritual of saying goodbye when the time comes. One respondent

suggested taking something of comfort from their home that symbolically represents their family. They also emphasized the importance of calling home often, though this is often complicated by the time differences. The practice of self-care was universally encouraged.

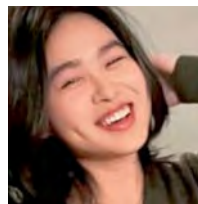
In closing, my experience living and working in Asia for the past two decades has been one of the greatest learning opportunities of my life. For those of you who are invested in being good hosts for our international students, I advise you to travel abroad and spend some time in exchange with new cultures. I am often asked to comment on what I have learned from my international work. My simplest response is that I didn't know what I didn't know, until I left my own culture and immersed myself in another. As Gregory Bateson once said, "it takes two, to know one." For myself, I did not know how arbitrary many

of my choices, biases, assumptions, and modes of life were until I left my own culture and emerged myself in another.



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References

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