Teaching in an Increasingly Multi-cultural Setting

A Guide for Faculty

Recognizing and Addressing

Cultural Variations

in the Classroom

Produced by

Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence

Intercultural Communication Center

Carnegie Mellon

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In the past, I could assume that all or most of my students shared certain kinds of understandings or experiences. With classrooms increasingly made up of students from other countries, or from ethnically-identified subgroups within the U.S., I can no longer make any assumptions at all. This is a disconcerting realization for an instructor.

-- Carnegie Mellon faculty member

As of 2005, there were over two thousand graduate and undergraduate international students at Carnegie Mellon, representing a broad range of cultural and educational backgrounds. This cultural diversity is an exciting development with tremendous pedagogical potential, but it also poses real and significant challenges to faculty.

This document was created in response to faculty requests for information and advice concerning teaching in an increasingly multi-cultural setting, and it is organized around issues raised by faculty themselves in a series of discussions conducted over the past several years. The information and suggestions presented here draw on the perceptions and experiences of Carnegie Mellon students and faculty, the combined experiences of the Intercultural Communication Center and the Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence, and current educational research.

Because it would be impossible to exhaustively catalog cultural variations or offer simple how-to solutions for what are complex issues, the intention of this document is to:

- raise awareness about the types of challenges international students face;
- provide examples of the kinds of issues that may affect students in your courses; and
- offer suggestions based on strategies members of our own faculty have successfully employed.

Although this document does not specifically address the challenges international faculty encounter in adjusting to U.S. educational expectations, the sections below may nonetheless illuminate some of the cultural issues involved, and help international faculty calibrate to a U.S. university.

We begin by addressing several background issues that may shape an international student's vision of higher education. We then discuss a number of cultural variations that can have a profound impact on teaching and learning. Finally, we present suggestions for addressing these issues, gathered from faculty across the university.

Several things bear mentioning before we proceed. First, many international students are from the same ethnic background as students born and/or raised

International students must meet the same challenges their U.S. peers face in college while in many cases also navigating new cultural terrain, a second (or third or fourth) language, and an educational system with different rules and expectations. Compounding these challenges may be visa issues, anxiety about money, and pressure to meet family, community or government expectations. Cultural background, moreover, shapes students' attitudes and values, knowledge base and skill set. These, in turn, influence classroom behaviors, study habits, writing styles, faculty-student interactions, etc.

in the U.S. Thus, it may not be initially apparent which students are domestic vs. international, and assumptions based on physical characteristics or clothing styles may prove to be wrong. Second, among students born or raised outside the U.S., there is tremendous variation in English proficiency and familiarity with U.S. educational and cultural conventions: Some students have excellent conversational English but struggle with reading and writing; others may find casual conversation more difficult than formal English. Some students have spent considerable time studying in the U.S. before beginning college while others are studying here for the first time. Because international students do not all encounter the same challenges or respond to them in the same way, assumptions about one student based on experiences with other students can be wrong.

The same, however, can be said of U.S. students, who also come from highly disparate cultural and educational backgrounds. A student born and raised in the rural deep South is likely to have a very different set of cultural expectations than a student born and raised in San Francisco's China Town, whose experiences and perspective may differ from those of a student from a mid-western suburb. **Thus, appreciating and addressing cultural diversity in the classroom goes beyond meeting the needs of international students by creating a more dynamic and productive learning environment for all students, and a more rewarding teaching experience for faculty.**

Recognizing that each international student's experience is different, this section presents four background issues that shape students' perception of their college education in the U.S. and thus can have a profound impact on their thinking and behavior.

Decisions about Education

For the most part, U.S. students actively participate in decisions about which college they will attend and what their major will be. These decisions are generally made with an eye toward the student's interests and desires, although parents can exert considerable influence and financial considerations can also be determinative.
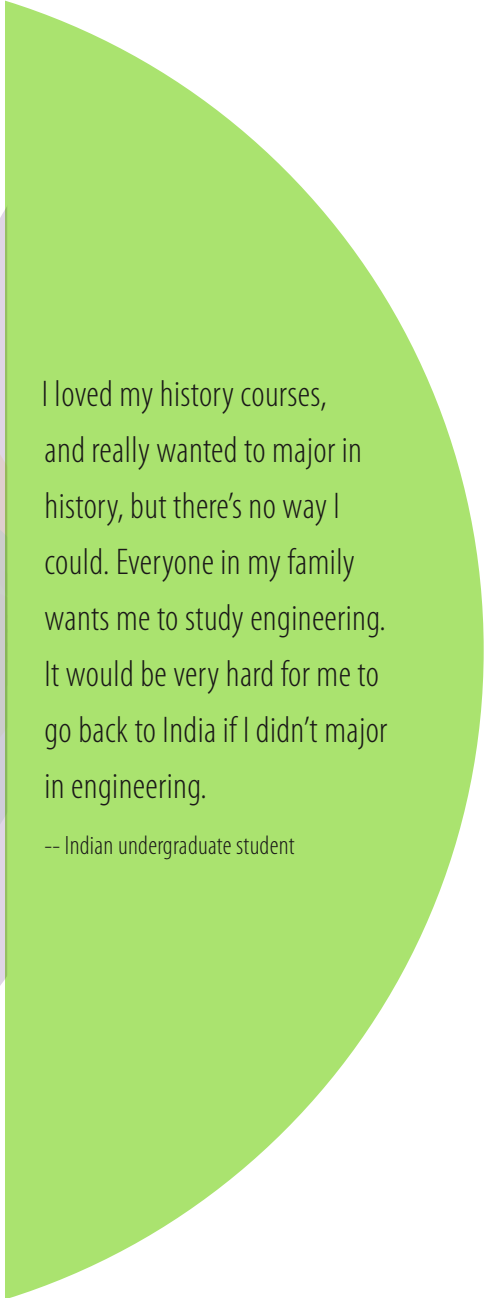
It is common in some other countries, however, for college and major to be determined by parents or family with considerably less—or no—input from the student, and with no expectation on the part of students that they should have input. In some countries, moreover, exam scores often determine academic options and choices, sometimes as early as age 13.

Thus, in some cases, international students feel pulled between their own desires and their family's expectations, or between the expectations of two different cultural systems, one which may emphasize self-fulfillment and the other family responsibility. Furthermore, students may end up in a major for which they have little interest or aptitude.

Because of their experience with how U.S. students make decisions about their education, faculty may assume that all students have the same motivations or choices. They may, for example, not understand why one student persists in a major she does not seem to like, or why another refuses to major in a subject he clearly prefers.

Financing A College Education

In the U.S., undergraduate students and/or their parents are generally responsible for financing college, although government aid is also sometimes available to students (both U.S. students and permanent legal residents) in the form of grants, loans, and work-study. Paying for college undoubtedly creates stress for U.S. families; however, government resources provide a safety net for families

> I loved my history courses, and really wanted to major in history, but there's no way I could. Everyone in my family wants me to study engineering. It would be very hard for me to go back to India if I didn't major in engineering.
>
> -- Indian undergraduate student

[M]ost Singaporeans are here on government scholarships. Even if the sponsoring organization has no minimum GPA requirement for the student, most of us place great emphasis (perhaps too much) on academics — not only in terms of GPA but also graduating with double majors. There's lots of peer pressure in this respect.

-- Singaporean undergraduate student

One thing that really surprised me when I arrived here was to find that U.S. students only begin to learn to study in college.

-- Chinese teaching assistant

whose financial circumstances change suddenly for the worse. Moreover, while families often accrue debt and make sacrifices to pay college tuition, there is a pervasive cultural sense (variable somewhat by community and ethnicity) that college is something students do for themselves, not for others; in other words, their success or failure is their own and does not necessarily reflect on their family or community.

Financial arrangements for international students vary widely. Some governments finance students to study in the U.S., but may impose strict grade stipulations and/or an obligation to repay the government with years of service after graduation. In other cases, parents may sacrifice everything to pay for a U.S. education, or may finance the education on a trial basis on the condition that students must return home if their grades do not stay above a specified level. In some cases, the academic success or failure of an individual student has social and economic implications for the entire family. Moreover, families that finance their children's education out of pocket cannot rely on U.S. government assistance if their financial circumstances suddenly worsen. Both these factors can increase the anxiety students and their families experience.

As the result of their funding arrangements and/or family circumstances, international students may view their educational responsibility somewhat differently than domestic students. Some may view themselves more as employees working to fulfill a serious obligation to their government or employer than as consumers who may take or leave aspects of the education as they see fit. Others may feel intense pressure to succeed, and thus fight for every possible grade point to satisfy the very real demands of a sponsor, government or family.

Transition from High School

In the U.S., it is common for freshmen to find the intellectual demands and workload in college considerably greater than anything they encountered in high school. They often spend a period of time grappling with a difficult adjustment, and must develop strategies for managing time and setting priorities.

However, in some other countries, preparation for college entrance exams may be so rigorous and demanding that students learn early the kinds of disciplined work habits that many U.S. students struggle to acquire in college. While in some ways this may prepare them well for life at CMU, there is a flip

side: having pushed hard to gain admittance to a top-notch university, some students may come to college assuming that the pressure is behind them. They may even believe that it is impossible to fail at the college level. These students may be surprised to find a heavier workload and more academic pressure than they had anticipated.

Breadth of Study

There is an emphasis in the U.S. educational system on exposing students to a wide range of subjects and developing skills in diverse areas. Thus, achievement is measured in a variety of ways, and participation in a range of activities is rewarded. For example, admission into college or university is based on a combination of factors, including grades, SAT or ACT scores, interviews, recommendations, extra-curricular activities, work experience and essays. After arriving at college, moreover, most students are required to take a certain number of "general education" courses outside their major. At Carnegie Mellon, where multidisciplinarity and interdisciplinarity are encouraged, students may have even more exposure to subjects outside their major.

In contrast, the emphasis in some other countries is on gaining expertise in a focused area. College admission may be determined solely by a score on a national or university exam, and college students can expect to take courses only in their major, which they may begin to focus on as early as high school.

International students coming to CMU, therefore, may not understand why they must study subjects outside their major field. Furthermore, while they may have sophisticated abilities in their own field, they may lack skills and confidence outside that field. Finally, international students may expect their U.S. classmates to have the same academic focus and baseline knowledge in their major areas as would classmates in their home countries. They may be dismayed to find that this is not always the case.

We often avoid classes outside our academic majors, which are mostly in technical fields. In fact, we frequently complain about all those humanities requirements that we have to fulfill.

-- Thai undergraduate student

The most surprising thing for me is that the math and science abilities of U.S. undergraduates are very diverse. A few undergraduates learned advanced math, physics and computers during their high school years. But most students have inadequate training for scientific classes.

-- Chinese teaching assistant

It's interesting to me how surprised many international TAs are when they learn that U.S. high school students applying to universities are expected to have a broad range of experience that includes jobs (both volunteer and paid), participation in clubs, sports, and other extracurricular activities.

-- ICC staff member

In this section, we juxtapose mainstream U.S. educational norms with those of some of the cultures represented within our student population, examining a number of specific cultural variations that can influence student (and faculty) perceptions and behaviors in and outside the classroom. We believe that by appreciating the extent and nature of these differences, faculty can better understand the challenges that they and their students face, and thus provide more effective instruction.

Classroom Culture

U.S. Educational System

- In U.S. classrooms, the professor's role is not only that of the expert, but also that of a coach, facilitator and discussion leader.

- Students are generally expected to ask questions, indicate areas of confusion, and ask for examples to support their understanding. In some cases, students are encouraged to debate their peers, challenge their professors' ideas, etc.

- Traditionally, there has been a stronger emphasis in U.S. education on individual performance than on group work. Generally speaking, competitiveness, assertiveness, and outspokenness are encouraged in U.S. classrooms.

- U.S. classrooms are often informal: students do not rise when the professor enters the room; students are often encouraged to address the professor by first name; students sometimes bring drinks or food to class, etc.

- While there are some general norms for classroom behavior across the U.S. (for example, students usually know to come in to the classroom and take a seat), classroom cultures are highly variable, depending on the teaching style of individual faculty members. Some instructors insist on a high degree of formality; others are very casual. Thus, U.S. students do not expect uniformity across classrooms, and learn to adapt to different instructional styles.

- American secondary schools are generally co-ed, so men and women usually have had ample opportunity to interact in an academic setting before coming to college.

I was surprised to find professors and students interacting like friends, like there is equality. It is difficult for me to know how to address professors and I have learned that modesty is often inappropriate. In e-mails, for example, I cannot write the way I would in Japanese, like "I humbly request..." Now when I write e-mails, I know I must delete the first several lines of greeting.

-- Japanese graduate student

Classroom Culture

Possible Cultural Variations and their Implications

- In many countries, the professor's role is to impart expert knowledge and the student's role is to absorb it. Within these systems it would seem presumptuous for a novice to challenge an expert. Thus, international students may be reluctant to question a professor or to argue against a published opinion.

- In some cultures, students are expected to maintain a respectful silence in class. They may not be accustomed to asking professors for clarification or elaboration, and may view such behavior either as disrespectful to the professor or personally embarrassing. When international students do not volunteer questions, faculty may assume that they understand material that, in fact, they do not. When international students do not volunteer answers, faculty may assume that they do not understand material that, in fact, they do.

- In some cultures, group dynamics are developed in a more systematic and sustained manner than in the U.S., with greater value placed on interdependence and collaboration than on individual performance. Students may find the teamwork skills of their U.S. counterparts rudimentary, or simply have a different set of expectations for how groups should operate. Students from some countries may, moreover, think certain forms of collaboration are acceptable which might be construed as cheating in the U.S.

- In many other cultures, classrooms are much more formal: students rise when the professor enters the room, address their professors by titles, and follow stricter standards of behavior. International students may thus interpret the behavior of U.S. students to mean that they lack respect for their professors or are not serious about their educations. This perception may cause international students to lose respect for their professors and/or peers.

- In many educational systems, young men and women are separated. Consequently, mixed-gender pair work or group work may be a new experience for some international students, who may initially feel embarrassed and self-conscious.

In my country, students learn one way: from teacher to student. In the U.S., students learn many ways. And teachers encourage students to learn with discussions, asking questions whenever you have them, and so on.

-- Korean undergraduate student

In my country, there is a hierarchic relationship between teachers and students. Students must pay absolute respect to teachers. For instance, a student can't interrupt the teacher asking questions.

-- Chinese teaching assistant

> Sometimes students from China or other Asian countries look quiet in class. But this does not mean they lose concentration. On the contrary, keeping quiet is a way to show respect to the lecturer and is highly valued in China, usually.
>
> -- Chinese undergraduate student

Class Discussions

U.S. Educational System

- Most U.S. students have had experience with class discussions in high school. Thus, they are at least somewhat familiar with the discussion conventions (e.g. debate formats, small group work, etiquette regarding turn-taking, expectations for preparation and participation) that they will encounter in college classes.

- In the U.S., discussion classes, labs, studios and projects are valued as important parts of the learning process along with lectures, and students are expected to learn from one another as well as from the instructor.

Class Discussions

Possible Cultural Variations and their Implications

- Lectures are the standard mode of instruction in many cultures, and discussions may not have a place in the classroom. Thus, some international students may not see the benefit of discussions or group work, believing they cannot learn anything substantive from their peers. They may get frustrated and wonder why (as they see it) the teacher is not teaching. They may also not have learned the skills necessary for participating in discussions or debates, and may only feel comfortable participating in class when they can answer questions that require direct recall of what they have read or learned. When international students are quiet during discussions, faculty may assume that they are not interested or have not done the assigned reading.

- Even in cultures where discussions are a standard classroom activity, the unwritten rules for discussion may be very different than in the U.S. For example, in one culture, it might be acceptable to interrupt or talk more loudly to gain control of the conversation; in another, it may be considered polite to allow a short silence following any individual's contribution; in another, students might expect to be called upon before offering their opinion. International students may, consequently, find the U.S. discussion conventions confusing or frustrating, and have difficulty entering in in a culturally appropriate way. While students from cultures with a less aggressive approach to discussion may get left

out altogether, students from cultures which encourage more aggressive classroom debate may be perceived as disruptive or rude to their U.S. professors and peers.

- For some international students, the formal English of lectures and writing is more familiar and easier to follow than the colloquial English of classroom discussions. Discussions also require students to adjust to the speaking styles and intonations of numerous people, not just the instructor. U.S. students may also casually reference cultural phenomena that are unfamiliar to international students. These factors may make it difficult for international students to follow the train of thought, and thus to join in.

Reading and Library Research

U.S. Educational System

- In an academic setting, students read under intense time constraints and are often synthesizing information from various sources. To get through a heavy reading load, students are taught that skimming readings is acceptable, at least some of the time. They are also taught to quickly discern the content of a book or article by focusing on table of contents, introduction, headings and subheadings.

- Students' comprehension of readings relies not only on their language skills but also their ability to recognize the organizational structure and conventions of written English, and the markers authors use to signal when they are challenging previous research, switching tactics, asserting a new claim, etc.

- Students' comprehension, moreover, relies on a broad cultural knowledge: they have to recognize not only the point an author is making, but also understand the allusions, illustrations, and analogies an author employs.

- Students are generally encouraged to approach readings critically, i.e. to assess the validity of the author's claims, evaluate the evidence used, and consider implications.

- Students usually have some experience using libraries, searching for books or articles and referencing them in papers or reports.

We find that many international students, especially those from countries where language learning tends to focus on memorizing vocabulary and grammar rules, are confused by our interactive, participatory approach to language learning. They need explicit instructions to help them accept the idea that talking, debating, and interacting in English is a valid way of learning.

-- ICC staff member

My first semester here was very difficult and I became ill due to stress and lack of sleep. The main problem was that I did not understand how to interpret a U.S. syllabus. In India, the student is responsible for independently finding additional materials related to the syllabus and reading those in depth in preparation for the comprehensive final exam. When I came to CMU, I tried to do the same thing while also handling weekly assignments, something we didn't have in India. So for every book or article listed on the U.S. syllabus, I looked for several other related books and read those in depth as well, and this became an impossible task. It wasn't until the end of the semester that I realized that a syllabus in the U.S. gave one more than enough work to do.

-- Indian graduate student

Reading and Library Research

Possible Cultural Variations and their Implications

- Different cultures may approach academic reading differently. For example, students may come from an academic tradition where they are responsible for every line of a reading assignment, so they read slowly and meticulously. Students who come from educational systems that hold them accountable for the minutia in readings may have difficulty assessing the relative importance of information. They may have trouble knowing when – in a U.S. class – it is appropriate to skim. This, along with language difficulties, can make it difficult for students to keep up with a heavy reading load.

- Because of unfamiliarity with English writing conventions, international students may have difficulty recognizing both the organizational structures and writing conventions that would otherwise guide their reading. This not only makes it difficult to keep up with reading, but it may lead to misunderstandings of the text.

- Students from other cultures, moreover, will not necessarily have the cultural knowledge to accurately interpret certain texts. For example, if the author uses analogies or examples that draw on unfamiliar cultural referents, the point may be lost or misconstrued.

- Students from educational systems involving lectures and final examinations might approach readings with the expectation that they are to retain the information and synthesize it at a later date. They may not read with a critical eye or engage with the reading as a U.S. student (ideally) would.

- There may be different expectations in other cultures about how much reading a student should do on his or her own to complement assigned material. For example, in some cultures, graduate students are expected not only to do the assigned readings, but also to find and read related materials on their own to broaden their knowledge and help them prepare for final exams. A student from this sort of educational system might not recognize that in a U.S. course, one is expected to do only the assigned readings, unless further reading is required for a particular assignment.

- Some international students may come from countries or regions where access to libraries is limited, and they may not know how to use reference tools. On the other hand, they may have acquired good research skills within a different kind of library or reference system, and have difficulty transferring those skills into practice here. They may, moreover, have difficulty assessing the quality of sources (judging the merits of an internet site, for example). While this is a problem for U.S. students as well, it may be compounded by weaker language skills and unfamiliarity with U.S. library resources.

Writing

U.S. Educational System

- U.S. secondary education often includes a variety of writing assignments emphasizing personal expression, such as interpretive argument, opinion pieces and creative problem-solving, for which there is no correct answer.

- U.S. students are often graded on originality or asked to assert a novel claim in their written work.

- In written work, U.S. students are taught to state their main argument or interpretation directly and up front, then go on to support it with evidence. The focus in writing is to make one's point obvious to the reader.

Writing

Possible Cultural Variations and their Implications

- In some cultures, secondary education consists primarily of objective tasks that focus more on knowing the "right" answer than on developing or expressing an opinion. Students from such educational systems may search for the one, correct answer in assignments meant to prompt personal expression. Alternatively, they may think that if there is no right answer, all answers are equally acceptable.

- In some cultures, the role of a student is simply to transmit knowledge, not to form opinions about it. The task of writing a critique or interpretation may, therefore, be unfamiliar and difficult. Students may also hesitate to make judgments about a piece of writing if they have not explicitly been given instructions to critique the authors.

I don't have problems speaking English, but it takes me a long time to write a paper, and I often get negative comments from teachers on my writing assignments. The ICC Writing Clinic helped me to understand that my writing problems were often because I did not organize my ideas or build an argument in the way that native English speakers do.

-- Columbian undergraduate student

I thought summarizing related articles and giving my thoughts were good format for the paper. I did not know proper way of making referencing. I had by no means any intention to steal other peoples' works. I did not realize that this would cause this big trouble for me. However, the result is bitter because of my ignorance of reference format.

-- Korean graduate student

In some Asian countries, such as Japan where I am from, concepts of plagiarism are not taught or even brought up in the context of academic settings. I personally do not remember being taught how to create a reference list or how to cite works by others. Why is this? In many Asian countries, the instructional style is focused on gaining knowledge:

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- In other cultures, students may learn a different rhetorical style than that employed in the U.S. For example, students may be expected to begin a paper with background information and justifications and conclude with a thesis statement or argument, not the reverse. To students from such cultures, the U.S. style of discourse may seem unpersuasive because the main point is presented before a suitable groundwork has been established. When international students apply their own cultures' rhetorical conventions to written assignments in the U.S., their writing may appear to lack a clearly delineated argument or concrete proof of a thesis. While the difficulty of constructing a clear argument and marshalling appropriate evidence is by no means limited to international students, it may be exacerbated by differences in culturally-defined discursive styles and, of course, language ability.

- In some cultures, acceptable communication styles may be more direct or less direct than in the U.S. In some cultures, for example, students learn that sophisticated and subtle writing hints at a point, but leaves it to the reader to piece the ideas together. For students from cultures which value a less direct style of writing, U.S. rhetorical style can seem overly explicit, unsubtle, and even childlike. Similarly, a direct speaking style can seem impolite or unsophisticated. In written work in the U.S., international students may be perceived as "going off on tangents" or avoiding the point; this may be misinterpreted by professors as a sign that the students have unclear thought patterns or did not prepare adequately.

Academic Integrity

U.S. Educational System

- Attitudes towards cheating and plagiarism, as well as understandings of what constitutes each, appear to be in tremendous flux in the U.S. today, such that it is difficult to easily describe contemporary cultural morays concerning academic integrity.

- Individual faculty members define what are and are not acceptable forms of collaboration in the context of particular courses. For example, students may be allowed to work together on homework, but not on take-home exams. The same rules do not necessarily apply to all courses, so students must find out what each professor expects.

- Contemporary students were raised with the Internet, where information flows without a defined sense of intellectual ownership. They may or may not grasp the concept of intellectual property, understand fully what plagiarism is, or recognize why universities consider plagiarism a serious offense.

- Students' knowledge of documentation conventions also varies. While the majority of students know at least roughly how to cite sources, quote and paraphrase, etc., others have only a vague understanding. Still others are perfectly aware of what plagiarism is but engage in it nonetheless, from using passages from published sources without attribution to buying whole papers from Internet sources.

- Students recognize many kinds of "cheating" from glancing at a classmate's answer sheet to stealing an exam from the professor's office, and from "borrowing" an author's idea to buying entire papers from internet suppliers. While students may consider some forms of cheating (on a small assignment, for example) acceptable and others (e.g. cheating on a major exam or assignment) unacceptable, national research indicates that a large percentage are likely to engage in some, if not all, of these activities at some point in their college careers.

- Despite the fact that cheating of various sorts is increasingly common, most U.S. students would expect to be punished if discovered cheating and would experience some embarrassment if they were caught.

Academic Integrity

Possible Cultural Variations and their Implications

- Plagiarism may be defined very differently in other countries, especially those in which less importance is placed on the Western concept that an idea can be "owned." For example, in some cultures, students are encouraged to memorize and use long passages from well-known experts. In fact, in systems where the deferential incorporation of accumulated wisdom is stressed over intellectual property or the generation of new ideas, using the words of experts without citing them may be more respectful and appropriate than using your own words. U.S. standards and expectations regarding plagiarism, therefore, may not be immediately evident to all students.

(continued from previous page) in other words, teachers transfer their knowledge to students, who memorize the given information. Students are hardly (or never) asked to do extensive research based on what they learned, using resources other than the class materials. Thus, it is unnecessary for students to cite documents and thus such training is also unnecessary. Instead, students' performance is usually evaluated based on exam results. Exams often focus on the exact information from textbooks so students' ability to memorize and reproduce exactly what was presented to them is highly valued. Little emphasis is placed on how students have internalized what they've learned. . . Given such experience prior to coming to college, many international students might experience difficulty fully digesting the magnitude of academic integrity. They might know it in theory, but they might not take it seriously.

-- Japanese faculty member

Because of our strong bonds, Singaporeans try to take courses together and frequently collaborate on homework and projects, sometimes more than we should.

-- Singaporean undergraduate student

The ICC offers a seminar entitled "Citing Sources" to help non-native English speakers understand expectations regarding citations and plagiarism. Students can also make an appointment in the Writing Clinic for individual help with paraphrasing and documenting sources. For more information, contact the ICC.

- In cultures where a strong emphasis is placed on interdependence, "helping" your classmates do well in a course may be more important than competing with them. Students may not thoroughly understand what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable forms of collaboration in the U.S. context. For example, they may not perceive a difference between helping a friend with homework vs. helping him with a take-home exam.

- In some cultures, where interpersonal relationships and group solidarity are emphasized over abstract principles or institutional rules, "turning in" a classmate who cheats would be considered a more serious ethical breach than the cheating itself.

- Actions that would be perceived in a U.S. context as cheating (for example, copying a friend's correct answer) might not strike someone from another culture as inappropriate (why *not* learn the material via your friend?). By the same token, some practices that are widely accepted in U.S. society are viewed as illegitimate in other cultures. For example, to some international students, U.S.-style review sessions seem to verge on faculty-authorized cheating.

- In some other cultures, a certain amount of cheating on exams may be expected, particularly if students perceive those exams to be arbitrarily and impossibly difficult. In these contexts, actions that are considered cheating in the U.S. might be considered just good common sense, and may perhaps not even be described as cheating.

- Students from cultures with different orientations towards cheating and plagiarism may not realize that the sanctions for such behaviors in the U.S. are harsh, and be shocked to find themselves facing severe penalties (failure, expulsion, etc.) for actions that were considered minor in their home cultures.

- Students may lack the language proficiency to paraphrase an expert; i.e. they may find it difficult to put textual ideas "into their own words". They may also have trouble distinguishing common phrases or idiomatic expressions (i.e. language that is not necessary to attribute to a particular source) from words or phrases that are a specific scholar's intellectual property (and thus require attribution.)

- Many U.S. college students struggle to keep up with reading and writing assignments, and may reach a point where they perceive cheating or plagiarism to be the only way to survive academically. Because international students struggle not only with workload but also with language, they may reach this point of desperation even sooner.

Seeking Help

U.S. Educational System

- In the U.S., students know they can seek help from professors or TAs outside of class, and a number of them make appointments with their instructors or visit them during office hours. Meeting with professors and TAs outside of class is not reserved for students having trouble with course material. In fact, it is often stronger or more motivated students who take advantage of faculty and TA office hours.

- Students generally go to faculty and TAs with questions about a particular course or field of study, but know that there is a broader support system – health and psychological services, academic development, career counseling, student affairs, etc. – for help with other kinds of issues.

Seeking Help

Possible Cultural Variations and their Implications

- In some cultures, students are more accustomed to seeking help from peers than from the professor. This may be because the student feels self-conscious approaching an authority figure, because seeking extra assistance is viewed as inappropriate "hand-holding," or because asking for help is associated with weak or desperate students, and is thus stigmatizing. While soliciting help from peers can be helpful under some circumstances, there are times when peers are not in a position to provide helpful feedback.

- Students from some cultures may have difficulty refusing a request for help from classmates, even if the request creates ethical quandaries (for example, if a classmate asks to see one's homework.)

- In some cultures, students are used to simply dropping by their professor's office whenever they like, without an appointment, to ask questions or

In class I did not know what's going on. All that I could do to survive here was to reduce sleeping time, read the text again and again, ask . . . other students, because I could not understand what professor said in class. One course was very hard for me to follow because it was all related with speech. Words were difficult and contents needed profound concentration. I got lost easily in class. I started using the English tutoring service at ICC. I have worked hard to learn new things and build up my confidence.

-- Korean graduate student

discuss their work. Students from these cultures may be frustrated to find that faculty members have limited availability or require appointments.

- Students from cultures with a fair amount of gender segregation may feel awkward meeting one-on-one with a professor of the opposite sex.

- In many other countries, the support infrastructure that is the norm on U.S. campuses does not exist, and students may expect faculty to serve some of the functions that at U.S. colleges are performed by other offices on campus. Students may, for example, approach faculty with concerns that go beyond the usual academic boundaries, including advice on medical or visa issues.

Grading

U.S. Educational System

- In the U.S. education system, grades are usually given frequently throughout a course (e.g. on quizzes, exams, papers, projects, presentations.) Thus, students generally have a rough sense of their standing in a course as the semester progresses.

- Students are graded in a variety of ways within one given institution. Students do not expect a consistent grading system, and generally try to find out in advance how a particular instructor determines and weighs grades, whether he grades on a curve, gives extra-credit and partial credit, etc. Individual professors, moreover, set their own grading standards; some, for example, may grade student writing on the basis of content alone, and not mark down for poor syntax, grammar, spelling, etc., while another professor may put a greater emphasis on the writing itself.

- Grades are only one of many factors taken into account on job and graduate school applications, so while students feel considerable grade pressure, they have other ways (GRE scores, internships and volunteer work, etc.) to compensate for suboptimal grades.

Grading

Possible Cultural Variations and their Implications

- In some cultures, students only receive grades (or scores) on a final examination or a nationally standardized qualifying exam. Because of the focus on large, cumulative evaluations, many students may not see the utility of smaller assignments. They may, for example, prepare excessively (by U.S. standards) for the final exam without paying attention to assignments and other course requirements (class participation, for example) along the way.

- Many international students come from educational systems where grading is more standardized than in the U.S. These students may assume incorrectly that what is true in one course is true in another. Whereas U.S. students also find it difficult to navigate the requirements and grading criteria used by individual professors, international students may be even more confused if they expect a uniform system.

- Ambiguity or misunderstandings about grading criteria can sometimes lead to resentment between U.S. students and international students: U.S. students may believe that international students are not held to the same standards on writing assignments, for example, while international students may think that U.S. students (because of superior facility with language) are able to fake or finesse their way through.

- For reasons of maintaining family reputation, keeping a scholarship, etc. (see Financing Education), international students may be under considerable pressure to maintain good grades. With the stakes so high, some students may feel shame and desperation if their grades are not up to par, and may do everything possible to raise them, including appealing to the professor to raise a low grade. This puts stress on and creates dilemmas for faculty.

- Negotiating for grades, moreover, is culturally appropriate in some societies, not just for desperate students but for any student hoping to score higher. It may not occur to these students that the same behavior in a U.S. context can provoke considerable faculty resentment.

As the previous sections illustrate, international students have expectations based on their own educational and cultural backgrounds that may color their experiences in U.S. classrooms. However, the sorts of issues that arise as a result – confusion over proper citation conventions, reluctance to enter into a discussion, hesitance to ask for clarification, etc. – are often problems for U.S. students as well. Thus, many of the practices that can help faculty address the needs of international students are good general practices, and ultimately address the needs of all students.

The suggestions offered here are only some of the many possible strategies for teaching in multi-cultural classrooms. Because the issues faculty confront vary by academic discipline and the cultural composition of students, we encourage you to consult with the staff of the Intercultural Communication Center and the Eberly Center to discuss specific contexts, problems, or approaches. We also encourage you to share your experiences – positive and negative – with us.

General Advice

As we have seen, students' actions may be based on different cultural understandings of what constitutes appropriate student and instructor behavior. When a student is quiet during a discussion, for example, he is not necessarily unprepared or bored; he may simply be behaving according to his own culture's standards of classroom etiquette. When a student's writing seems vague and indirect it is not necessarily an indication that her thinking is disorganized or her effort minimal; she may be writing in a style valued in her own culture. Of course, it is also possible that the student in question *is*, in fact, unprepared, bored, or has not done the requisite work.

How is a faculty member to interpret the student's behavior or evaluate his work?

Perhaps the first step for faculty is to avoid making inferences about students' intelligence, work ethic, or talents based on behaviors that might simply reflect their unfamiliarity with U.S. educational conventions. In other words, it is helpful for faculty simply to be aware of cultural differences and sympathetic to the challenges students face in adjusting to them.

Helpful links:

Intercultural
Communication Center:
www.cmu.edu/icc/

Office of
International Education:
www.studentaffairs.cmu.edu/oie/

Eberly Center for
Teaching Excellence:
www.cmu.edu/teaching/

However, being sympathetic to and aware of cultural differences does not require faculty to lower their standards or apply a different set of performance criteria for international students than for other students. Faculty have the right – indeed the obligation – to set and maintain standards for the behaviors they expect in class (active student participation in discussion for example) and the performance they expect on assignments (e.g. a particular organizational structure in writing.) Instead of lowering or altering standards to accommodate international students, consider using the following pedagogical practices:

a. Make your expectations far more explicit than you may think is necessary.

b. Model the kinds of work you want your students to do.

c. Represent the material you are teaching in multiple ways.

d. Give students ample opportunities to practice applying the knowledge and skills you want them to acquire, and provide feedback to guide the development of new skills.

e. Provide varied opportunities for student-student and student-faculty interaction.

Make Your Expectations Explicit

Students enter your classroom with expectations and interpretations shaped by their own cultural conditioning. Your expectations regarding appropriate classroom behavior, faculty and student roles, good writing, etc., may not be theirs. This is a product not only of cultural differences but of variations in the teaching styles of different faculty members. Even students who are familiar with the U.S. educational system have to adapt to the differing expectations of their various professors. Thus, it is helpful to all your students to spell out as concretely and specifically as possible – on your syllabus, in class, on tests and assignments, etc. – what your expectations are in regard to issues such as the following:

Time Allocation:

International students may not know where to put their time and effort in a U.S. course. They may, for example, spend enormous amounts of time reading a text in minute detail and neglect to analyze it or record their own responses. They may focus intently on preparing for a final exam, but ignore homework as-

For resources on campus to help students manage their time more effectively, see:
www.studentaffairs.cmu.edu/
counseling/documents/time.htm

For Carnegie Mellon's policy regarding academic units and workload, see:
www.cmu.edu/hub/reg/
grading_policies.html

signments preceding it. It may help your students if you provide some guidance as to how to use their time effectively. You may, for example, want to:

- Provide a percentage breakdown of the graded components of your course (e.g. assignments 5% each; midterm 20%, etc.) so that students are aware of how course grades will be determined, and can make time allocation decisions accordingly. For the same reason, you may also want to give students a point breakdown on exams (e.g. multiple choice questions, 2 points; essay questions, 10 points, etc.).

- Give your students a rough idea of how much time each assignment should be taking. For example, you might want to tell students to come talk with you (or your TA) if a problem set takes more than two hours, or if they are spending too much time on each reading.

- Make sure your students know that, according to university policy, a 12-unit class should equal 12 hours of work each week. If students are spending considerably more time than this, they should talk to you or the TA to determine what the problem is. If language and cultural issues are at the root, you may want to send the student to the ICC or Academic Development for help.

Grading:

A percentage breakdown of the graded components of your course not only helps students make reasonable time-allocation decisions (see Time Allocation); it also alerts international students to the fact that their course grade will be determined on the basis of multiple graded assignments (exams, papers, lab reports, designs, etc.) Seeing all the course requirements and their weighting can be particularly helpful for students from cultures in which only end-of-term examinations really "count".

A detailed scoring guide or grading rubric, moreover, is invaluable for helping your students recognize the component parts of a task, and to see how their competence at these tasks will be assessed in grading. Constructing a good grading rubric is difficult. It requires being extremely clear in your own mind about what the learning objectives are for the course and for a given assignment, and knowing what skills and knowledge are required to accomplish those objectives. While creating a grading rubric can take time up front, it can also ultimately

For resources to help you develop clear grading criteria, see: www.cmu.edu/teaching/ resources/gradingcriteria.html

For sample rubrics or help developing grading rubrics for your own courses, contact the Eberly Center at 8-2896.

save time by making grading easier. It can also discourage students from grade-grubbing by showing them that grading is based on demonstrated competence in discrete areas, and reduce any suspicion – on their part or your own – that grading is completely subjective and arbitrary.

Discussion ground-rules:

Because students do not all come to the classroom understanding why classroom discussions are beneficial or knowing how to participate in one, it is helpful to:

- Explain (on your syllabus and again in class) why you think discussions and group-work are valuable, and what you think students will gain by participating.

- Explain how participation in discussion will be evaluated and how much participation is expected. For example, you might inform students that a meaningful contribution involves stating a claim and using evidence from readings to support it. You might specify that you expect students to speak up at least once a class period, or twice a week, or three times a semester via e-mail or discussion board, etc.

- Clearly lay out the ground-rules for discussions in your class: i.e. whether students should raise their hands or just speak out, how students should challenge one another respectfully, how you expect them to ask one another for clarification or illustration, etc. Some faculty members have found it effective to ask students to discuss and determine these ground-rules for themselves. This may be a good opportunity for international students to engage in a dialog with their peers about cultural expectations regarding classroom behavior.

- Encourage your students to speak slowly and clearly, and prompt them to explain cultural references that other students might find confusing.

Faculty/student roles:

Because the roles faculty play may be quite different in other cultural contexts, it is especially important in multi-cultural classrooms to spell out clearly how you see your own role in the classroom, and what you expect from your students. You might, for example:

For resources on fostering greater participation in classroom discussions, for examples of discussion ground-rules, or for help developing ground-rules and strategies for your own courses, contact the Eberly Center at 8-2896.

For a list of student support services on campus, see: www.studentaffairs.cmu.edu/ mission.html

- Make it clear to your students when you and your TAs are (and are not) available for help outside of class (e.g. post your office hours, explain when you do and do not check and respond to e-mail, etc.)

- Explain what kinds of help you and your TAs are able and willing to provide (e.g. perhaps you are willing to read drafts of papers up to one week before the paper is due, or your TAs can go over problem sets during their office hours.) By the same token, make it clear what kinds of help you are unable or unwilling to provide (e.g. perhaps you are not willing to repeat lecture material for individuals who miss class, or are unwilling to address writing problems, note-taking conventions, or time management issues that would better be addressed by the ICC, Academic Development, or other resources on campus.)

- Give your students information about resources available to address problems (health and mental health issues, second language problems, etc.) that fall outside your purview.

- Explain to students whom they should contact (you? their TA? one another?) with particular kinds of problems and questions. For example, you might want to encourage them to get lecture notes from one another, but to talk to a TA with questions about grading.

- Make it clear how and why you think students should help one another (i.e. why group work is valuable, what sorts of diverse perspectives you believe students bring to bear on course material), and what kinds of collaboration you consider appropriate and inappropriate (e.g. is working collaboratively on a homework assignment acceptable? a take-home exam? a lab report?).

- Make it clear to your students that to ask for help reflects well, not badly, on them, and that it allows you to diagnose areas of student confusion and address them more effectively. You may want to credit students anonymously for raising questions or asking for clarification, as a way of validating these behaviors.

Classroom etiquette:

Not only do international students have their own ideas about what constitutes polite and rude behavior in the classroom, so do faculty. Some profes-

sors allow students to eat in class; others do not. Some find it offensive when students wear hats in class; others do not. Because this is not only culturally but individually variable, you may want to make your own rules and expectations clear regarding:

- Absences

- Coming to class late or leaving early

- Use of technologies such as laptops, cell phones, or tape recorders

- Eating and drinking in class, chewing gum, using tobacco products

- Forms of address (for example, what you would like to be called)

- Appropriate attire (e.g. long pants for labs, proper shoes for dance classes)

- Etc.

Definitions and policies concerning cheating and plagiarism:

While we might all wish students – domestic as well as international – knew, understood, and followed university policies regarding academic integrity, it is increasingly clear that they all do not. Instructors at CMU have found that the following things help address this problem:

- Explain the reasons for rules regarding academic integrity, discuss the reasoning behind citation conventions and explain how correctly citing and building on the work of others can help students establish their own credibility as scholars.

- Include definitions of cheating and plagiarism in your syllabus, explain university policies, and clarify what your own response will be to infractions.

- Explain what kinds of collaboration are and are not acceptable in your course.

- Ask to see assignments and papers at various stages of developments (for example, ask for early project proposals, first drafts of papers, etc). Not only does this discourage outright plagiarism, but it can help you discern problems students may have with paraphrasing, citing sources, constructing bibliographies, etc., while there is still time for them to

For help clarifying and communicating your course policies to students, contact the Eberly Center at 8-2896

For Carnegie Mellon's policy on cheating and plagiarism, see: www.cmu.edu/policies/ documents/Cheating.html

For information about plagiarism-detecting software, see: www.library.cmu.edu/ ethics3.html

learn from your feedback and correct the problem.

- Use software (for example, Turnitin) that checks for plagiarism. You can use this yourself to detect plagiarism, but you can also have your students use it to monitor their own work. For example, international students might use this software to see if they have inadvertently borrowed too much of an author's own language to constitute paraphrasing.

- Explicitly teach documentation and paraphrasing conventions. Not only are these new skills for many international students, many U.S. students also do not get adequate training in high school.

Model The Skills You Want Students To Develop

Because students, regardless of nationality, do not always immediately understand what is expected of them in a college classroom, it is helpful not only to spell out clearly what you expect of them (see Make Your Expectations Explicit) but also to provide models of the kinds of work you want them to produce and the kinds of skills you want them to cultivate. Seeing illustrations of good work can help students identify skills they need to develop. You might, for example:

- Provide examples of outstanding student work (e.g. outstanding design projects, stage sets, engineering solutions, papers) and discuss with your students what makes them effective. This can help students (a) identify the elements of good work as they apply to particular assignments within particular domains, (b) become more conscious of these elements in their own work, and (c) understand what you, as an instructor, are expecting of them. Models of excellent student work can also help students think more broadly about an assignment, consider alternative approaches, etc.

- Model the kinds of discussion and debate behaviors you want students to develop. Some faculty members, for example, invite a colleague to class to debate an issue. Watching two faculty members engaged in an animated debate can help students understand how to participate in a respectful but intellectually challenging exchange. It also illustrates the dynamic nature of academic discourse.

For more information about the robust fluency needed to succeed in the academic environment, visit:

www.cmu.edu/icc/languagetraining/robust.shtml

- Model the kinds of problem solving thought processes you – an expert in your field – use. For example, you might want to talk students through your own intellectual process as you contemplate a hypothetical research topic, engineering problem, or artistic task. By doing this in a very deliberate way, you model to your students the way you expect them to organize their thoughts (and work space, in studio courses), pose questions, consider various courses of action, make decisions, identify errors, consider implications, make corrections, etc.

Represent The Material In Multiple Ways

Research in cognition shows that students are able to understand concepts and retain knowledge best when they are engaged in active learning. In other words, students learn by doing, by finding their own ways of representing, making sense of, and using the material they are taught. Instructors can further this goal by employing non-verbal representations of concepts they explain verbally, or providing supporting information in other forms: websites, handouts, etc. Using multiple representations is a useful practice for all students, but is particularly helpful for international students, who may struggle to master the English they need to follow lectures, readings, and discussions. Non-verbal representations provide international students with opportunities to access course material that are not language-dependent. This can further both comprehension and retention. You might, for example, use some of the following strategies:

- Supplement verbal explanations with visual images that support the relevant concepts: graphs, slides, flow-charts, video clips, concept maps, etc. This not only engages students' attention; it provides them with alternative ways of perceiving, interpreting, and organizing information.

- Provide tactile or auditory experiences (e.g. opportunities to use tools, hold materials, manipulate objects, or listen to sounds or music) that help to illustrate the topic. By engaging more of a student's senses, you create more avenues for retrieving information for later applications.

- Supplement lectures with complementary information in other forms. Handouts, for example, can help students process course materials outside of class time, when they have more time to work through language issues.

Instructors should be careful, however, not to overdo it. While reinforcing

concepts via different media and drawing on different senses (visual, auditory, tactile) can help students to understand and retain concepts, too many simultaneous representations can cause cognitive overload and add to, rather than decrease, confusion.

Give Students Ample Opportunities To Practice Skills And Improve Performance

International students do not always have experience producing the kinds of work U.S. faculty assign. When students' first experience using a new skill (e.g. writing a personal response, participating in a class discussion, giving an oral report, or detailing the steps they took in a calculation) is for a grade, frustration and anxiety may limit their ability to learn from, never mind enjoy, the exercise.

One way you can help alleviate some of this stress is by spelling out very clearly what you expect students to produce (see Make Expectations Explicit). Another way is to give students opportunities to practice applying new knowledge and skills in low-pressure contexts. Some examples of this are listed below. It is important to remember, however, that even on un-graded assignments, students need feedback (from you, your TA, each other) in order to correct their mistakes, develop their own ability to recognize inadequate comprehension and flawed reasoning, and improve their performance.

- Assign un-graded, peer-evaluated, or pass/fail writing assignments to allow students to experiment with and get used to styles of thinking and writing that may, at first, be unfamiliar and intimidating. This permits students to calibrate to your expectations and develop new skills before the grading stakes are high. Such assignments also allow you to assign more writing (which students generally need) without necessarily increasing your own grading burden significantly. However, while such assignments do not necessarily require formal grades, it is important that students get feedback (from you or their peers) so that they correct and do not reinforce errors.

- Identify the core components or skills required to do a particular task, and give students opportunities to practice each independently, allow-

ing them to sequentially acquire the complete set of skills necessary to perform higher-level analytical, creative, or problem-solving tasks. For example, you might develop different exercises that allow students first to explain a concept they have been taught in their own words, then distinguish that concept from related concepts, then identify which concept is applicable in a particular situation, then apply it to a relevant problem, and finally critique the application.

- Put students into small groups to discuss a design, case study, experiment, etc., and give various members of the groups different, perhaps rotating, roles (for example, one person could be responsible for framing the problem, another one for reporting the group's solution to the larger class, etc.) Interacting with peers may be considerably less stressful to an international student than facing the whole class, and can help the student develop the skills necessary to attempt participation at other levels.

- Break up lectures by giving students opportunities to practice applying a skill. You can, for example, ask students to work on answering a question or problem individually, in pairs, or in small groups. This has the advantage not only of giving students practice opportunities, but it also provides you with immediate feedback on what your students do and do not understand, so you can address areas of confusion.

- Give your students a set of questions to consider while doing their first several reading assignments. This will help them learn to distinguish key ideas from minutia, to cultivate the kind of meta-cognitive behaviors you want them to have, and to become more effective and critical readers in your discipline. You might also want to give students tips for reading efficiently. For example, you might encourage students to quickly scan an article before beginning to read, and to use tables of content, chapter titles, subheadings, charts and graphs, etc. to determine the organizational structure of a reading.

For help in designing effective assignments, techniques for creating more practice and feedback opportunities in large classes, or resources on providing students with effective feedback, contact the Eberly Center at 8-2896.

The ICC has services available for students who want to further develop skills necessary for academic discussion and presenting. For more information, visit: www.cmu.edu/icc/

Provide Varied Opportunities For Interaction

While some international students may be hesitant to approach or question an authority figure, they may feel much less reluctance about discussing an idea with or debating a problem with peers. You might consider some of the following techniques and ideas in order to capitalize on the learning potential of peer-peer interactions as well as to encourage greater faculty-student interaction.

- Opportunities for small-group discussions or problem-solving , pair-work, etc. give students a chance to interact with one another, and to raise ideas they might not be comfortable bringing up to the whole class. The tasks instructors assign student groups should be defined and focused, however, so that students know what is expected of them.

- Be sure to monitor student groups to correct misconceptions and to make sure that everyone is involved and no one person is dominating the process.

- Be aware of the composition of student groups. Sometimes discussion or problem-solving is enhanced in groups that are heterogeneous in regard to race, ethnicity or gender: the group members introduce different perspectives and learn from each other. Sometimes, however, individuals in heterogeneous groups can feel isolated (as, for example, in the case of a sole woman in a group of men, or the only Chinese student in a group of U.S. students) and withdraw. Research suggests that there are times when students in homogeneous groups can function more effectively. Because there is not an ideal solution to the problem of group composition, you may want to try different arrangements and see what works best for particular assignments.

- Make a point of calling on quiet students to emphasize that their input is valuable and welcome. To reduce self-consciousness and anxiety (either because of language difficulties or simply unfamiliarity with participatory educational styles), you may want to give students time, individually or in pairs, to craft their answers before they are asked to share them with the class.

- Because some students may not completely understand the purpose of office hours, or may feel uncomfortable approaching professors outside

of class, you might consider issuing a more formal or even compulsory invitation. Some faculty, for example, schedule time to meet briefly meet with all their students (individually or in groups) at some time during the semester. You might, for instance, schedule 15-minute meetings and require students to come with 2-3 questions about the class.

- Encourage students to e-mail you ideas and questions. This provides students who are not comfortable speaking in front of the whole class with ways to engage in a dialog with you about course material.

- To reduce the sense among some students that seeking help is a sign of weakness, you may also look for ways to validate and legitimize students who seek help. For example, in class you might anonymously reference insightful questions students brought to you during your office hours, mention insights that students gave you during a discussion outside of class, or thank students for honestly revealing areas of confusion – then review the problematic material.

All students, domestic and international, have many adjustments that they must make in their transition from high school student to college undergraduate. Faculty can help students make the transition smoother if they understand and anticipate where problems can arise, and use these understandings to develop appropriate instructional strategies.

If you have further questions on any of the issues discussed in this document, please contact the Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence or the Intercultural Communication Center. We would be happy to talk with you about your experiences and to share our insights and resources with you.

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