

Schools Must Help International Students Adjust

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It is all too easy to forget how many aspects of American life seem peculiar for the newcomer. Nestled nicely in the society we know well, with the ease of riding the Metro, the T, or SEPTA, knowing exactly what is held on the shelves of CVS and what is better to seek at the local convenience store, how (and when) to pay with check, credit, or cash. It's easy to fail to see how difficult life can be socially, academically, and psychologically for each incoming international student.

Most educators recognize this difficulty and act with the best of intentions to support foreign students. However, an urgency exists for more cohesive and coherent actions on the part of faculty, staff, and students. This urgency comes from both the great promise of internationalization of our campuses and also the potential peril of the perception of America that is being imparted through our schools.

An orientation video for Columbia University's Business School features an Israeli journalist studying at the school. During the video, he provides (often humorous) views of Americans as a means for other international students to understand the context that they are entering.

For international students, immigrants, and other travelers to our shores, the assessment of 'us' is immediate. As American students wonder about the smell of *kimchi* permeating through the dorm, the Korean students write Kakaotalk messages to their friends and family, explaining the 'odd Americans.'

For our international students, the behaviors and comments of their domestic peers and instructors represent all of America. The question thus becomes, what message are we giving?

For the Israeli student at Columbia, Americans initially appeared 'fake' and 'insincere,' a description based on his experiences of hearing enthusiastic promises from colleagues to 'do lunch' without a follow-through. For many Korean students, their new American friends are cold and distant, failing to live up to the *jung* special bond that exists in their own society. Greek students seeking *storge* may report a similar coldness, while Colombian students may feel perplexed at the lack of close familial ties.

In all of these interactions, the key is not to force a behavioral change for either party, but instead to explain and embrace the cultural differences. International students are diplomats, and must be received as such. The challenge as educators is to both show acceptance for other cultures and values yet share the 'American' perspective that the students have come to learn.

Although each student and each situation is unique, I have provided five general tips that for administrators, advisors, faculty and anyone else involved with international students. These tips draw on my years of experience with hundreds of international families and schools. Most of the lessons have come not from what has been working, but from what has not.

1. See the Individual

Make a conscious effort to see each student not only as a member of a particular population, but someone who has a different perspective that you would like to learn about. This isn't easy, particularly as we gain more experience with, and knowledge about, other cultures. One faculty member told me that every time she saw a Korean boy, she couldn't stop herself from thinking "he will be a bully in my class." However, she was aware of her bias, and worked hard to see the individual student.

2. Approach Without Assumptions

The content and process of communication should not be based upon whether a student or a family speaks English fluently, or even how long they have lived in the United States. Cultural frameworks run deeply, and many immigrants adhere more strongly to norms of their homelands when they are abroad. Assuming that 'Yongbin's mother lived in the U.S. for a year, so she should understand the school system' is a sure route to poor communication.

3. Conduct Cultural Competency Training for Staff AND Students

No matter how good hearted and well-intentioned, a school that does not appear to know (or care) much about an international student's home country and culture will be starting from a disadvantage. When an American corporation receives important clients from abroad, extensive work goes into learning customs. Why? Because respect and diplomacy show the goodwill necessary for more business. For a school, good intentions can be shown through proper background knowledge. Additionally, if you've ever traveled abroad, you know how confusing adapting to a new country can be. All staff who will be interacting with international students need orientation and continued training, as do the students, both domestic and international.

4. Develop Stronger Systems and Build Better Materials

Communication is critical, and systems need to be put in place to ensure that international families are 'in-the-loop.' Assigning staff members to communicate with or allocate information to international families is a good start; but the enormity of these tasks should not be underestimated. The duties range from communicating school expectations, coordinating translations for paperwork, understanding the SEVIS process, conducting emergency calls, creating school wide initiatives to share cultures, ensuring that international students have a place to go during holidays, and conducting regular check-ins.

Schools also need to develop a range of materials in several languages, including guidebooks of school personnel explaining roles and responsibilities, videos showing students what typical classrooms and dormitories look like, and handbooks with directions for interacting with faculty members. Developing these systems and materials should not be taken lightly, and must be matched with appropriate investments of time and resources.

5. Develop Alumni and Community Support

When that investment is unavailable, schools should turn to their alumni networks and communities for support. Former students living abroad can provide in-country orientation and training sessions and parents can build strong networks for newly accepted families. The former students themselves however should also be trained. Furthermore, schools becoming more internationalized must learn to look outside of their own staff for members of the local community with specific cultural knowledge and skills. These outside advisors or visiting faculty members can play a vital role in catalyzing cultural clubs, communicating with parents, and mentoring youth.

With the ever-growing population of international students, we cannot afford the organic practices to which we've grown accustomed. We need a well thought out systems change, a new outlook, and even courage to say that even the best of us could have done better. Without doing so, I am concerned for the students who will continue to have a difficult time fully expressing themselves in their first or foreign language, have lost touch with the cultural roots and can never fit in back home, and cannot communicate with their own family members anymore. I am concerned about the state of international relationships especially in Asia, and the messages we are allowing the students to take back home, those who could very well be future political and business leaders.

I believe we can utilize our great resources in the U.S. to develop students who are completely bilingual and bicultural, and empathic students who see Americans and each other as global citizens in a small beautiful world.