# Engaging International Students in the Classroom

International Student Success Series 2025

March 6, 2025. 12.30 pm – 1.30 pm on Zoom

Sponsored by the [International Student and Scholar Office](https://global.unl.edu/isso) and the [Center for Transformative Teaching](https://teaching.unl.edu/)

In this panel session, international students and instructors who work closely with international students discussed what classroom engagement looks like in other educational systems, as well as what instructors can do to better clarify their expectations and provide more flexible options for engagement.

Panelists:

* Dr. Milad Mohebali, Department of Educational Administration
* Prof. Emmeline Lemos Watson, Durham School of Architectural Engineering & Construction
* Olwen Nguyen, undergraduate student in Computer Science
* Fotima Turdalieva, PhD student in Child Development & Early Childhood Education
* Ndrao Faye, PhD student in Teaching, Curriculum, & Learning
* Ding Xu, PhD student in Political Science

Moderator: Angela Bryan, Associate Director, International Student Support

## Interactions between faculty and students in other countries vs US

* In many countries, universities have a clear hierarchical structure. Students are expected to call professors using their title and last name. First names are not commonly used. There is almost no informal interaction between students and faculty.
* In the US, many faculty encourage open communication, expression of thoughts, and sharing of ideas, which is unusual for international students and require a period of adjustment.
* In the US, there are inconsistencies in how faculty members want to be addressed (Dr., Ms., first name, etc.).
* In the US, faculty hold office hours and encourage students to take advantage of them. Office hour culture is different or non-existent in many other countries.

## Challenges for international students

* US academic culture has many unwritten rules on how to engage in a classroom. International students have to figure things out on their own. More clarity and transparency on these rules will help international students better adjust to the US academic culture.
* International students can miss out on academic opportunities in the classroom if they are trying to pick up the cues and understand the unwritten rules. It’s especially challenging if there is only one or two international students in the whole class.

## Factors that contribute to comfort or discomfort in classroom discussion

* Class size makes a big difference: it’s easier for international students to share their opinions in small classes.
* Their level of English language proficiency may make international students reluctant to participate in discussions. They are often concerned that their accents make them hard to understand.
* International students want to make sure that the instructors can follow what they are saying. If they think that’s not the case, they start doubting not only their language abilities, but their knowledge of the subject.
* Stress is a serious factor in an international students’ life. It can affect their speech in general as well as negatively impact grammar, pronunciation, etc.
* When working in groups, international students often feel like their contributions are not valued by other group members.

## Inclusive strategies and support for international students

* Intercultural communication skills need to be clear and intentional.
* In a major where one gender is dominant, a safe environment should be maintained.
* There need to be more opportunities for domestic and international students to learn from each other and grow together.
* Syllabus and other course materials need to create equitable environments in courses. For example, some cultural terms might not be “common knowledge” for international students and need to be clarified.
* Instructors need to learn at least the basics of student visa requirements, opportunities, and limitations. Instructors often don’t understand the complexities for international students to work in the US.

## Some final insights and solutions

* Instructors need to notice the difference in learning between domestic and international students more and apply various learning strategies to address them.
* Some instructors prefer to keep international students together during group projects as it helps them thrive. However, some international students would also like more opportunities to interact with domestic students inside and outside of the classroom to have more diverse interactions.
* Class needs to be a safe space for international students.
* There are multiple resources provided to international students by UNL. Instructors need to share these resources with the students to help them grow and thrive as learners and people.