Helping International Students Transition to US Academic Culture

International Student Success Series 2025

February 6, 2025 from 12pm – 1pm 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 faculty instructors discussed their experiences and insights on transitioning into the US academic culture. Most of the panelists have experience both as international students and as instructors in the US.

Panelists:

* Dr. Pinar Runnalls, Assistant Professor of Marketing in the College of Business
* Dr. Piyush Grover, Assistant Professor at the College of Engineering
* Parviz Jamalov, Masters Student at the College of Journalism & Mass Communications
* Dania Javaid, PhD Student (3rd year) in Educational Psychology
* Shams Hassiki, Undergraduate student (junior) in Physics

Moderator: Angela Bryan, Associate Director, International Student Support

# Communication

* The panelists highlighted how adjusting to a new country when first arriving in Lincoln was a very big change. The amount of information and emails were quite overwhelming, especially for students whose first language is not English (for one of our panelists, English was her 5th language).
  + Tip: For academic advisors to be aware of language intensity of courses, particularly for the first semester. Support in going through the many resources, including things like setting up a phone, would also be highly appreciated.
* International students can run into situations where they say something “wrong” or where everyone else seems to have a common understanding that they are not aware of, which can be tough experiences.
  + Tip: Encourage and acknowledge the importance for international students to ask the small or simple questions and put yourself out there.
* One of the panelists had an experience where the instructor didn’t respond well to his group’s ideas to improve a project. This easily made them jump to negative conclusions through the conveyed level of egocentrism and ignorance.
  + Tip: Communication. Reach out and discuss the inputs put forward by international students, explaining why they would or wouldn’t work rather than ignoring their opinions in silence.

# Course Participation

* The panelists shared about the differences regarding participation compared to their home countries. Many came from passive teaching styles and had to adjust to the active learning styles highly present in the US, including interactive learning, experiential learning and engagement.
  + This can lead to different expectations for class. One example shared of a new expectation was that materials should be reviewed before class rather than only after it was presented.
  + A positive highlight of one of the panelists was the opportunity to partner with a local business as part of a course assignment
  + Cultural and personality differences played a part in the level of participation of students
  + One instructor who has a class with an international context encourages her international students to talk about their experiences and promote discussion. This has fostered more of a community within the classroom.
* Office Hours can be a new and hazy concept for international students. One panelist shared how this was not a setup back in India and it took over a year to recognize their value. It was only after the instructor invited him to office hours and seeing a line of top students that he appreciated it and saw that it was a known thing for others.
  + Tip: Consider having an open-door policy, as well as make office hours more known for students.
* Similarities and differences in groupwork and collaboration was also discussed. While there are still some universal aspects about groupwork that is the same in the US compared to other places, there were differences in expectations and practices.
  + A panelist shared that many international students may come from collectivist countries as opposed to an individualistic country like the US. While there is familiarity with groupwork, in the US the collaboration tends to stop at the end of the project. She would like collaboration to be encouraged beyond just the group project.
  + One panelist commented that as graduate students, there aren’t as many opportunities to learn from peers.
  + For another panelist, the media had influenced his expectation of groupwork as he felt it depicted that American students would lead. He later came to recognize that many leaders in industry are international. He subsequently had to learn when to lead, and encourages others to try and work with other people or in groups with local students and see how those dynamics work.
  + A panelist observed that when students can choose their own teams, international students tend to group together. In the past he has also tried to pair students up at random (since in industry you don’t choose your own teams). He is still observing how these differences in grouping are affecting learning.

# Academic Integrity

* The panelists shared how the culture and expectations regarding academic honesty varied greatly from they were from.
* Some panelists shared that copying work was a normal part of their previous academic culture: either they were not taught about plagiarism or citations, or it was something that wasn’t enforced. As such, students can be surprised to learn the seriousness of academic integrity in the US. Another noted that she had thought copying work and placing quotations was enough and later an instructor taught her how to properly use sources in her writing.
  + Tip: Encourage students to ask more questions about policies and rules on academic integrity, especially since students may feel hesitant to ask about cheating and plagiarism.
  + Tip: If relevant, share your own personal experiences with academic honesty and integrity, as well as why it is done (to give credit to who has done the work). Share examples and keep explanations short and sweet.
  + Tip: Provide resources to students and explain the consequences of academic dishonesty – such as people having to resign due to plagiarism in research papers published may years prior.
  + Tip: Try to look for and address underlying reasons why students may resort to academic dishonesty, such as lack of confidence, time or the amount of work. One example may be imposter syndrome where students mistakenly feel the need to plagiarize since they lack confidence in their writing skills. Consider scaffolding and distributing weighting of assignments to help build confidence and minimize the want to plagiarize.

# Other advice

* Learn more about your students! Talk and share experiences with colleagues.
* Try to create opportunities to talk to international students outside of class. Show them that someone is interested in them and build the rapport.
* Remember EMC2: empathy, mindfulness, compassion and critical inquiry when interacting with international students.
* Make students feel valued! Its easy for international students to feel that they are left in the dark because there is so much to know. Having an advisor to help tell you what needs to be done and are proactive with giving reminders is a great help.
* Since the US is so large, it may be easy to forget that there are so many other countries in the world. Acknowledge these students and get their perspectives.