

## Easing the Transition

### Building Academic Support for International Graduate Students

**A**S AN ENGLISH MAJOR IN HER NATIVE CHINA, Shuang Wu felt fully prepared to start graduate school in the United States in 2000. Ever the tenacious student, Wu excelled in her studies in her home country, mastering written and spoken English. But when she enrolled in her first U.S. graduate program in New York, Wu realized adjusting to a new culture wouldn't be easy as she thought.

"I don't think I ever had a severe language barrier because I studied English hard before I came to the United States—but it's very different when you're totally immersed in an English environment," Wu says. "The lack of community was a big issue for me because graduate students typically live off campus. So I had no sense of community [in those early months]."

Like Wu, many international graduate students—especially those studying in the U.S. for the first time—face numerous academic and cultural challenges. While adjusting to a foreign culture, sometimes struggling to communicate in English, they often have to navigate unfamiliar tasks such as renting apartments, getting driver's licenses or social security numbers, and setting up phone and Internet service. And international graduate students often have spouses and children who come with them and face their own cultural adjustments. In the United States, these students also must adhere to strict immigration regulations while striving to succeed academically.

Understanding and adapting to the U.S. educational system was one of the most difficult challenges Wu faced when she first came to the United States. Oftentimes, she didn't want to bother her professors with her own concerns, feeling that her questions might be an intrusion for busy faculty members immersed in their own research projects.

"You have to maintain a strong and positive relationship with faculty, but you can't bother them too much," she observes. "It's an intricate balance, and it doesn't come naturally. Someone needs to tell you about these kinds of situations, so to navigate successfully you need an advocate or adviser. Part of

the graduate experience is to figure out the unwritten rules for success."

Though Wu faced challenges, she sped through her academic programs, earning her master's degree in 2002 and her doctorate in 2005. Now she's a member of the global learning faculty at Azusa Pacific University in Azusa, California, and is passionate about helping other international graduate students adjust to academic life in the United States.

"I would like to see international graduate students have a positive graduate experience in areas that could have been more fulfilling for myself," says Wu, who did find support and encouragement from a writing group she formed with fellow doctoral students. "I'm not sure I fully overcame the difficulties I experienced, but I just focused on getting my degree, and I tolerated the fact that there wasn't a strong community of support and there were many cultural adjustments I had to make."

International offices at many colleges and universities provide an array of support services designed to help international graduate students adjust to the U.S. higher education system and American lifestyle. These departments help international graduate students make connections across campus—with faculty, peers, and other resources. And when necessary, they act as international students' advocates by educating faculty and administrators about the difficulties international students encounter and what kind of assistance they may need.

"Our mission is to help our students to be successful by helping them to meet their educational goals," says Denise Medeiros, assistant director of the International Student and Scholar Office at the University of North



  
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Carolina at Charlotte. "If that's not happening because they lack certain academic support at our institutions, then our mission is not complete, and we have some work to do. As advocates for international students, we need to know what's happening on our campuses and become engaged with

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classes taught by volunteers from the local community—including one volunteer who has served the program for 17 years. The classes offered include English Idioms and Slang (a very popular choice), Beginning English Conversation, Advanced/Intermediate Conversation, and Grammar

and Pronunciation. Family members of the international graduate students also are invited to take the classes.

"These volunteers are people who want to show hospitality to the international community," says Adria Baker, associate vice provost for international education and executive director of the Office of International Students and Scholars. The programs also provide important local connections

"for graduate students who enjoy getting out and learning about the culture." Most colleges and universities offer orientation programs for new international students—both graduate and undergraduate—at the start of the academic year, covering the basics of American life and culture, immigration requirements, and an introduction to the U.S. system of higher education. For graduate students, however, the programs often go into more detail about

**Starting With Basics**

Though most graduate schools require a certain level of English proficiency for admission, speaking, and understanding English in the classroom setting or with native speakers is still a challenge for many international graduate students. Even if they excel in reading and speaking basic English, they may struggle to grasp nuances of the language, as well as slang and colloquialisms. As Wu says, "Having a good TOEFL score doesn't guarantee one's success in communication, let alone academic success in general."

At Rice University in Houston, the Office of International Students and Scholars sponsors free, weekly English and culture

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topics such as research ethics, academic integrity and plagiarism, working as a teaching assistant (TA), and relating to supervisors. This is particularly important for international graduate students who are studying for the first time in the United States—international students who studied in the United States as undergraduates usually are accustomed to U.S. academic standards and practices.

Academic integrity can be a particularly challenging issue for international students at all levels who come from countries with different citation rules for research papers. In some countries, for example, it's not considered plagiarism to copy entire passages verbatim within a research paper. At Johns Hopkins University's Institute for Policy Studies, Carey Borkoski, assistant director of the graduate program in public policy, offers library sessions to help students with citation and reference issues, as well as pointing them to the university's writing center. Because the program's course load emphasizes writing, Borkoski established a tutoring program matching the department's best writers in their second year with first-year students.

"We encourage international students to pair up with domestic students so they get extra practice with editing," says Borkoski. "Sometimes the content may be good, but the students will have trouble with the language. Getting a domestic student to edit really helps."

## Training TAs

Unlike their undergraduate counterparts, international graduate students tend to work more closely with faculty members as teaching (TAs) or research assistants. They may need more guidance about how to carry out their responsibilities than domestic students. Part of that guidance would include ensuring that international students understand some of the distinctive qualities of the U.S. education system, such as the participatory nature of the U.S. classroom. This could be an adjustment for international graduate students who are accustomed to a more passive learning environment.

"In the U.S., students are asked their opinions from a very early stage, and graduate students who don't know that might find

that the undergraduate students they are teaching are frustrated," says Carolyn Sorokin, director of international studies at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut. "Undergraduates in the U.S. are used to being asked their opinions, they're used to being asked to defend their views. [That could be a conflict] for international students who come from countries where the norm is rote memorization and taking down verbatim what the professor says [without discussion]."

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Many universities offer specialized training for international TAs (ITAs). At Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada, for example, ITAs attend a special orientation during the first week of school that covers adapting to a new culture, a discussion of the Canadian classroom, relating to supervisors, and resources on campus. University staff members contact ITAs during the summer before they arrive on campus to assess their needs for language support. Those needing assistance may attend a supplementary series of training sessions designed specifically for TAs.

UNC Charlotte's International Instructor Language Support Program offers training for international TAs and consults with academic departments on dissertation-writing seminars. International students also are encouraged to participate in "Dissertation Boot Camp," at the university's Center for Graduate Life.

## Peer-to-Peer Support

Like Wu, who started a writing group with peers in her doctoral program, many students find invaluable support working with their classmates. At JHU, Borkoski estab-

lished a mentoring program three years ago that pairs incoming students with current students. They begin communicating months before the new students arrive on campus, discussing anything from academics at JHU to life in Baltimore. Though the service is open to all students, the idea grew out of the need to provide greater support for international students, who often don't even have the chance to visit campus before they arrive for their first day.

"The program is critically important, especially to international students as they are unfamiliar with U.S. culture and day-to-day requirements, such as housing and transportation," Borkoski says. "It seems to help with adjustment if they feel like they are part of a community. It also provides one-on-one attention from a second-year student, and my impression is that students really like knowing that there is a person assigned to help them acclimate and get settled with their U.S. studies."

At Rice, Baker works closely with the university's Graduate Student Association (GSA) to develop programs and services that are helpful to international graduate students. Though the GSA once comprised only domestic students, in recent years international students have become active participants, allowing better integration of U.S. and international students. Baker meets regularly with this group for feedback and to address concerns.

"The Graduate Student Association has a close partnership with our office," Baker says. "We work together on professional development programs as well as fun stuff. Our relationship with the graduate students and the leadership is very strong."

## Family Support

When international graduate students come to the United States or Canada to study, many bring along spouses and families who typically have the same cultural adjustment needs. Spouses also may need assistance with immigration paperwork and work visas, as well as language support. Those with children may need guidance to find good, affordable child-care or to enroll children in local schools.

Janet Hulnick, director of international

student and scholar services at SIT Graduate Institute in Brattleboro, Vermont, spends a lot of time helping international graduate students and their families become acclimated to life in the United States. She has helped them with everything from locating suitable housing and obtaining a driver's license to connecting spouses with language programs and connecting them to other international families within the local community.

"It's about giving as much support in the beginning so they can be independent later," Hulnick says. "I do as much as I can, and I find it really rewarding. I enjoy hooking them up and seeing them become independent and feeling comfortable here."

Social programming for international graduate students also is important, and many schools offer events ranging from meet-and-greets to talent shows. While these programs aren't considered academic support, experts say it's important to make sure that international graduate students feel connected to their peers and to the campus. These programs also help them become acclimated to U.S. culture and develop confidence and leadership skills.

"In my observation of international graduate students over the years, it's the more adjusted, connected, and socially balanced students who most often seem to establish positive relationships with their faculty advisers and also seem to perform well academically," Medeiros says. "Those who never quite acclimate but rather just get through their programs may earn their degrees in the end, but often miss some key components of their education that come from making connections with those from the host culture."

### It Takes an Academic Village

Colleges and universities can be most effective in helping international graduate students acclimate to American culture and the education system by providing support from multiple departments on campus. For colleges and universities wanting to create or expand support programs for international graduate students, experts recommend partnering with other departments on campus.

"It's important to work with other, relevant

departments—we don't do it all ourselves," says Christine Peachey, manager of Carleton University's International Student Services Office. "When we're working on orientation and academic topics like academic integrity, we bring in faculty members and folks who are most knowledgeable in these subjects. It makes for the best delivery of program."

Baker, who has found success in working closely with Rice's GSA, suggests collaborating with student leadership to develop practical, professional development programs, and fun activities. During her 15 years at the university, Baker has seen more and more graduate students take on leadership roles, and these programs foster interaction between American and international students.

"We could do the English language programs here with our staff, but we don't because we want to bring in different perspectives and different accents, so involving the students is a great thing," Baker says. "They can be your hands and your feet in many ways and add a different dimension."

When colleges and universities provide academic support that contributes to the success of international graduate students, everyone wins, Medeiros says. "When one international student has a successful, positive U.S. university experience," she says, "she or he carries it back home and can dispel 10 myths about life and people in the U.S."

Adds Baker, "International students bring their education and culture to American universities, so we learn from them, but they also learn from us—hopefully the good things in our culture and in our academic system," Baker says. "When they go back home, they are our ambassadors. Hopefully, they'll tend to have better relationships with us because they understand our culture." **IE**

**KAREN DOSS BOWMAN** is a freelance writer in Bridgewater, Virginia. Her last article for *IE* was "Foreign Language Learning at Community Colleges," which appeared in the intensive languages supplement published with the March/April 2011 issue.

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