

# Barriers to Transitions for International Students: How Higher Education Practitioners Interact with Students

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## Abstract

Given the number of international students on higher education campuses, we are concerned about practitioners' ability to interact with those students. The purpose of this op-ed is to help practitioners be more aware of the barriers international students often experience when they transition to campus and ways practitioners can better interact with students. We focus on two barriers international students experience: language and communication style. Lastly, we provide four recommendations for practitioners to consider as it relates to their interactions with international students: policies and practices, proactive connections, collaboration, and training.

## Keywords

International students, language barriers, culture, student services, higher education practitioners

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For years there has been discussion about the globalization of higher education—some practitioners may have learned about this concept in their higher education student affairs programs. However, in practice, we are curious about the number of staff and faculty who feel prepared to support international students at U.S. higher education institutions. In 2019-2020, approximately 5.5% of college students were considered international students and the largest percentage of international students came from China (35%), India (18%), and South Korea (4.6%) (Moody, 2020; Redden, 2020). We suspect that many higher education practitioners are inadequately prepared to support international students because “international students are often viewed in ways that benefit the US, such as for economic, political, and diversity needs” (Yao et al., 2019, p. 46).

We are also concerned about how practitioners interact with, even unconsciously, international students. Therefore, we will share recommendations that practitioners can utilize when working with international students. International students have reported several obstacles they have encountered on college campuses such as, language barriers, homesickness, and feeling less welcomed by the institutions (Lee, 2008). We focus on cultural aspects of communication barriers international students have encountered and then provide potential approaches practitioners can try in their future work.

## **Culture**

Understanding the differences among cultures for international students is one crucial aspect that needs to be considered when communicating and interacting with students. Lysgaard (1955) developed a U-Curve model to explain the transitional experience stages international students encounter during their study and work in the United States through four phases (home, adjustment, adaptation, and host phases). Oftentimes, international students begin to realize that they are experiencing a brand-new culture that is quite different from back home (Zhou and Zhang, 2014). They may not feel comfortable facing the newer environment by doing things that are not familiar to them (Li et al., 2017). Social adjustment takes some time for international students in transition to the adaptation phase, where they get to know the difference between previous and new cultures and start building relationships with individuals from the new culture. Because of this, it is vital to understand causes of language barriers and communication styles should be applied to support international students, especially in the adjustment and adaptation phases (Yeh & Inose, 2003).

## **Language Barriers & Strategies for Inclusion**

We anticipate many higher education practitioners know English is not the first language for all the students they support. However, just because practitioners know this does not mean they have the tools to interact with a student whose first language is not English. In response to a bias incident at Duke University in 2019, Dr. Li Jin articulated three problems that still exist at universities: inadequate teaching and learning training, multilingualism intolerance, and incorrect information regarding multilingualism (Redden, 2019). Dr. Jin’s perspective on this topic is relevant due to her being “an associate professor of Chinese at DePaul University who along with a colleague surveyed DePaul faculty about their perceptions of international students” (Redden, 2019, para. 13). While reading Redden (2019), the author seemed to show how attitudes and beliefs influence a person’s work. Therefore, practitioners must identify the attitudes and beliefs they have about international students. Many higher education practitioners then need to change the way they interact with students.

The reason why we feel it is important for practitioners to do this reflection is so they can then determine what actions they need to change. Practitioners may not even realize how their attitudes and beliefs about international students influence policies and practices they develop or the relationships they build. However, one study found “self-reported English language fluency was a significant predictor of acculturative distress” (Yeh & Inose, 2003, p. 23). Therefore, we offer two approaches that practitioners can utilize when interacting with international students:

- Policies and Practices. Analyze current policies and practices to identify ways to make them more inclusive, especially considering international student experiences. For example, higher education institutions could allow international students to use their native language to report bias incidents through verbal or written reports and the use of a translator (Yao et al., 2019).
- Proactive Connections. Higher education practitioners who do not work in an international student services office (OISS) must build relationships with OISS. Practitioners will have more knowledge about when to refer international students to OISS, rather than referring students to this office for everything

## Communication Style Barrier & Strategies for Inclusion

Understanding the cultural difference among different countries can help with narrowing the knowledge gap between what kind of transitional supporting services an institution should be providing in the adjustment and adaptation phase for international students on campus. For instance, the difference in communication style is related to culture and yet addressed frequently. High-context cultures often show less-direct verbal and nonverbal communication, and oftentimes using communication gestures and reading more to express less-direct messages (Würtz, 2005). Low-context cultures, on the other hand, utilize direct verbal communication to understand a message being communicated (Würtz, 2005). Because of the difference, there could be some barriers among students who come from low-context and high-context cultures. For example, students from Western culture are considered as low-context speakers because they express ideas explicitly with a longer explanation (Westbrook, 2014). Confucius culture students with high context need multiple communication methods to help them receive and exchange thoughts in a conversation. This distinction is also worth noting in discussion with Asian international students because they are used to conversing multiple times to build relationships. In addition, in a case study conducted by Li and Zizzi (2008), one international student addressed that “the social conversation and getting engaged with American students was difficult” (p. 396), especially the unfamiliar slang and joke. Because of this, transitional supports help students adapt to the new environment and get to know the differences in communication styles. We offer two recommendations that practitioners might find helpful when seeking to be more supportive of international students.

- Collaboration. The interaction among practitioners, faculty, and students should be increased in discussing and sharing topics of cultures. For example, practitioners and faculty and practice being involved in cross-cultural dialogues.
- Training. In order to better promote the idea of understanding the culture in-depth, practitioners should collaborate with OISS to prepare training programs for faculty and staff.

## Conclusion

We focus on language barriers and communication style through cultural aspects to demonstrate the improvements higher education staff can make when supporting international students in the adjustment and adaptation phases within the U-curve model. By considering the experiences of international students and making policy changes, other students benefit, such as students who do not speak English as their first language. Proactive connections and collaboration among university departments such as the Office of Bias Response, Office of International Student Services, and study abroad programs, can provide enhanced holistic support to international students. Lastly, training allows practitioners to continue learning about the tools needed to interact with international students. There are likely institutions who are already implementing these ideas, while others are just starting to identify barriers and solutions. Whichever point your institution is at, practitioners must center international students as they strive to be more inclusive in their interactions.

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