Student Notebook: Tips and Tricks for International Students' Survival in a Foreign Land

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Having left their home country to pursue academic goals, international students represent an increasing proportion of the global student population. Around 1,100,000 international students sought undergraduate and graduate degrees during 2022 in the United States alone (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2022). Student mobility is linked to host countries’ favorable economic prospects because it often supports the growth of a highly skilled workforce (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012). Additionally, international students in higher education generate more than $40 billion in revenue in the United States each year (Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2020). The number of international students across countries varies; nevertheless, this number is projected to rise in an increasingly globalized world (Beine et al., 2014).

However, living in a foreign country can often be an exhausting and cumbersome experience for a student. Remember when you left home to attend college, or perhaps a time when you moved away from your family and friends? You likely felt some loneliness and uncertainty. Now imagine also struggling with your language skills, making it difficult to effectively communicate with those around you. On top of this, you are grappling with understanding the nuanced aspects of social interactions. Seeing your family and friends would cost thousands of dollars and entail a multiday overseas trip. That tightness in your stomach at the thought of this is what international students often experience living and studying away from their home.

Unsurprisingly, international students experience high stress and social pressure (Amado et al., 2020). Add to that the fact that some face abuse by superiors who see them as easy targets with little protection from university administrations or the governments of the countries where they reside (Lee & Rice, 2007). These experiences are often accompanied by financial struggles, particularly for those from disadvantaged economic backgrounds. Often, families commit their entire life savings to sending their child to study abroad, bringing immense pressure to succeed. However, language and social challenges can make success difficult for international students.
As an international student myself, I have experienced many of these challenges since coming to the United States as an undergraduate student. The good news is that most international students have an ultimately positive experience, just as I have. Here are my suggestions for other international students—as well as their allies.

For international students: The saga of surviving in a foreign world

On your journey of studying abroad, you will encounter many other international students. Although this is usually a positive experience resulting in friendships and bonding, it’s important not to compare yourself to how others are doing. Some people are supported by family wealth and enjoy comforts you could never dream of. Others may have more supportive social networks or the luxury of not having to worry about their financial future or providing for their family back home. It seems intuitive to try to track your progress by comparing yourself to other international students but remember that we all come from different parts of the world, with different advantages and disadvantages. In other words, not all international students are the same.

Also keep in mind that you are stronger than the average individual. Leaving your comfort zone to pursue an education in a foreign country is no easy feat. As with most international students, you may find communicating, learning, and producing academic work in a nonnative language particularly cumbersome. We academics strive to produce work that is a mirror of perfection, often at the cost of our mental well-being. And the problem with speaking a foreign language is as much social as academic: People will make assumptions and judgments based on how you speak. This doesn’t mean you should change how you speak—embrace your accent!

Learning a new language is tricky, because it permeates all aspects of your life and is often imbued with others’ evaluations. Certainly, these evaluations can also be thinly veiled racism. Having an accent does not make you less intelligent than your interlocutor. Be confident in your communication skills. If you are already in grad school, that means you convinced some pretty smart people to let you into their program. Plus, communication is not solely based on language and pronunciation but also on characteristics such as body language and the ability to listen and understand ideas. Before your language develops to the level you aspire to, lean on these skills and let them guide you in your academic and social endeavors.

For academic advisors, friends, and other allies of international students

Please don’t assume that an international student does not understand complex ideas simply because they are communicating them in a nonnative language. International students may occasionally struggle to articulate complex ideas succinctly in a nonnative language. These skills get better with exposure and time. Similarly, if you are struggling to understand someone who is not speaking in their native tongue, please don’t loudly say “What?!?” This will only contribute to the confusion and may make them even
less likely to want to communicate with you. Simply say, “Oh, sorry, I didn’t get that. Do you mind elaborating?” or something similarly unassuming.

Read all of the articles from the September/October Observer.

What if an international student is not familiar with a particular popular culture reference, your favorite sports team, or a cartoon you grew up with? Please do not gasp in horror and ask how that may be possible. It is possible, just as it’s likely that you’re not familiar with references that they know well.

Finally, look out for signs of bullying, and if you do find out that an international colleague is being discriminated against, or treated poorly by others in your community, take action! International students often do not report abuse for fear that this may negatively reflect on their future visa prospects or their ability to stay in the country. Academic bullies thus frequently operate under a veil of secrecy.

Although being an international student has its challenges, we all embarked on this journey to pursue our interests, provide for our families, or simply to enjoy an adventure. Studying in a foreign country can absolutely be a positive experience that also facilitates your academic and career aspirations.

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References


