Succeeding *as an* International Student *in the* United States *and* Canada

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FOREWORD BY

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Chapter 4

The Biggest Academic Challenges for International Students

When students study abroad, they move into a new academic and social environment. That means they have to deal with challenges they did not face at home, and a few challenges that do not face local students here. International students must adjust to a new country, far away from family, friends, and familiar places. They must read, write, and negotiate everyday life in a foreign language. And they must cope with a new and unfamiliar educational system, one that sometimes emphasizes different values from those they know at home, whether that home is in Spain, India, Brazil, China, or South Korea.

What's so different about North American universities? What do international students need to know to perform their best, to achieve the educational goals they set for themselves? What do they need to know to settle comfortably into their new surroundings, to find convenient places to live, shop, and worship?

To find out, I spoke with experienced international students and with the faculty, deans, and advisers who work closely with them. They understand university education here and have useful advice to share with undergraduates and graduate students coming to Canada and the United States. According to them, international students face three big issues in their academic work:

- mastering English,
- expressing their own viewpoints in papers, class discussions, and research, and
- learning the rules of academic honesty, as they are understood in the United States and Canada.

Handling these issues well will take you a long way toward academic success here.

In this chapter I will offer a brief sketch of these challenges. In the chapters that follow, I will fill in the details. Chapter 6 stresses originality in U.S. and Canadian classwork; chapter 8 explains our rules of academic honesty; chapter 9 explores the culture of North American higher education. In other chapters, I discuss everything from speaking up in seminars to serving as a teaching assistant. Later, in chapters 10–25, I discuss the personal side of moving to North America. In each chapter, I offer practical ideas to make your life easier and your academic work more rewarding.

What's New and Challenging?

When faculty and advisers are asked what academic issues are most pressing for international students, they often begin by saying how important it is to master English. You need to know it well to understand the assigned readings and join in class discussions. You need to know it well to understand what your professors and classmates say.[1] You need to use it when you teach course sections or supervise student lab work. To do your best work, you need to read, write, and speak English well. It's just as important for your life off campus, as well.

If you are here with a husband or wife, your spouse will also benefit from learning English. The social benefits are enormous. You can develop a much wider circle of friends, and your language will improve as you socialize. If you cannot speak English, your friendships will be limited to those who speak your native language.

While it is great to have friends from your home country, it is even better to have friends from there *plus* friends from around the world. Whether your new friends' languages are Arabic, Spanish, Hindi, or Mandarin, their common language here is English. The better you know it yourself, the easier it will be to engage them socially and intellectually.

Besides mastering English, faculty and advisers stress two other issues:

- the high value placed on original work, and
- the importance of acknowledging others' work whenever you use it.

1. The only exceptions are francophone universities in Québec.

U.S. and Canadian universities prize originality and creativity, not conformity and rote repetition. They encourage students to think for themselves, to develop their own informed viewpoints. The sooner you recognize this emphasis, the better your academic experience will be.

Of course, the quest for originality does not mean ignoring what the experts say. You should read assigned texts and articles carefully. Necessary as that is, it is not sufficient, especially in advanced classes. You also need to formulate your own perspectives, your own ideas about the materials. At the most advanced graduate levels, you need to push forward with your own distinctive research.

For some international students (and for some local students as well), this approach to learning feels unfamiliar or even disrespectful to the professor. That is *not* how it is seen, however, at the university level in the United States and Canada. It is considered desirable, not impertinent, for students to formulate their own ideas and pursue their own research. When others discuss their ideas, you are welcome to offer constructive suggestions and relevant comments. Nor is it disrespectful to differ with faculty or classmates, as long as you are thoughtful and courteous. The university is a place to explore new ideas and debate old ones. Students are encouraged to join that debate, to add their ideas to the mix.

The main point is that class discussions, papers, labs, and exams try to foster *both* expertise and originality. In chapter 6 ("Thinking Creatively"), I say more about how you can contribute your own ideas to class discussions and lab work.

All serious research builds on existing work and seeks to go beyond it. In doing so, it combines your work with the work of others. That brings us to the third major issue stressed by faculty and international student advisers. Everybody at the university—students and faculty alike—must clearly differentiate his or her own work from that of others.

Whenever you rely on others' work, you must acknowledge it openly. Whenever you use their ideas, research, or data, you must cite them. Whenever you use their words, you must quote them *and* cite them. Proper quotation and citation really matter here. Leaving them out, even if it is unintentional, is considered plagiarism and is a serious violation of our academic rules. Fortunately, it is easy to avoid these problems. I show you how in chapter 8 ("Avoiding Plagiarism").

Chapter 9 discusses broader issues about values, expectations, and behavior on campuses across the United States and Canada. Understanding them will help you navigate this new environment.

What Is Distinctive about U.S. and Canadian Universities?

The goal of all these chapters is to smooth your transition from studying in your home country to studying in North America. To help you make that transition, I ask two fundamental questions, "What's so different about university life here? How does it compare to university life in other countries?"

Let me offer a short list of my own answers here. In the chapters to come, I will fill out the details.

- Your participation in class is welcomed and is often required in seminars and discussion groups. You should not just sit quietly and take notes. Even large lecture courses have weekly discussion sections where you are encouraged to share your ideas.
- Critical discussion is welcomed. Class participation is not just a matter of repeating what your professor said or what the assigned readings covered. Of course you need to know those things, but you should do more than nod and agree. You should also feel free to question the experts. That includes questioning your professor's views, as long as you do it respectfully.
- Your own individual viewpoint is encouraged in class discussions, papers, and exams. That's especially true in more advanced classes, where your ideas should build on the foundations acquired earlier.
- Reading assignments at university level are extensive, much more than many international students are used to doing each week. In many classes, the assignments are too long to read everything closely. Instead, you have to read selectively, emphasizing some works more than others. You might analyze some works very carefully and skim others. Ah, but which ones are most important? That's a crucial question, and it's one you need to answer for yourself in many classes. In fact, learning which readings are vital and which ones are merely supplementary is an important part of your education.
- Class syllabi in U.S. and Canadian universities are more than a list of required readings. They set out the teacher's expectations for the course in some detail. They say when exams will be held, when papers are due, and, in many cases, what is expected on each assignment. "A syllabus here is like a contract between the teacher and student," one professor told me. "It spells out what is expected in the course."

- University students are continually evaluated on their performance, not just once at the end of the course. Most classes have several tests or assigned papers as the term progresses. Weekly problem sets are common in the sciences. In undergraduate classes, it is common for professors to give brief tests (quizzes) on the most recent work. These assignments spread out the workload and take some pressure off the final exam, since it is not the only grade for the course. But there's another benefit that is even more important. Because students are typically evaluated several times during the course, they get feedback while they can still use it. They find out what they are doing well and what they need to work on. That means tests, papers, and lab reports are not just measures of performance; they are valuable diagnostic tools for the student and professor.
- Academic performance is stressed. In some countries, admission to elite universities is sufficient to prove a student's abilities. Here, admission is only the beginning. There is a strong emphasis on performance *within* the program, even within the best programs. Performance may be measured by the faculty's evaluation of your papers, exams, and labs, or by your grade point average. Whatever way it's measured, the quality of your work has a major impact on the next stage of your career or education here.
- Pluralism is a fact of life in North American universities and a fundamental value shared by students, faculty, and the wider society. Tolerance for others is expected. Teachers and students here come in all shapes and sizes. They are citizens of all nations, members of all races and religions, men and women, gay and straight, old and young.[2] You do not have to embrace their ideas, values, or lifestyles, but you do have to treat everyone with respect and tolerance. They should treat you exactly the same way. That is a core expectation of living in a free, liberal society.

A Word of Reassurance

All this takes some getting used to. It may be confusing at first, especially if you were raised and educated with very different values. That's certainly what most international students say. But they usually move along the learning curve very quickly. What initially seems strange soon becomes familiar.

2. Gay = homosexual. Straight = heterosexual. Both "gay" and "straight" are widely used. Neither term is derogatory.

A few months later, you may hit a rocky patch. The newness will have worn off, class assignments will be bearing down, and the weather is beginning to turn cold and dreary. You may experience a sense of fatigue and homesickness. When you reach this low point, life here may seem more depressing than exciting. International students call it the "three month blues," since that's when it often strikes. As one student told me, "That's when it really hits you that you are a long way from your home, family, and friends."[3]

Remember, it's a bump in the road, not a permanent roadblock. With the help of supportive friends and advisers, with some intellectual challenges in class and some interesting activities around town, you can get back on track. I'll offer some practical suggestions.

Now, let's explore some of these issues in more detail.

3. To make matters worse, the holidays are beginning and local students are going home to their families. In late November, Americans celebrate Thanksgiving by gathering around family tables for traditional meals. (Canadians celebrate their Thanksgiving in early October.)

One experienced observer told me that it's a good time for international students to "take a trip, sometimes organized by the university or a [campus] club. Go home to roommates' family—see the real America around the [Thanksgiving table]. . . . Just sitting around the dorm when no one is there can be . . . a prescription for homesickness."

Chapter 5

Succeeding Academically

To succeed in American and Canadian universities, international students need to understand their new academic environment and adjust to its demands. You cannot meet these demands unless you know what they are.

This chapter will explain some of the challenges of being a student here, and some of the opportunities. It will focus on what's different about North American classrooms, how to cope effectively with this new environment, and, most of all, how to achieve real academic success here.

Improving Your English

The most obvious demand is to work comfortably in English. All your lectures, all your class discussions, all your papers, and nearly all your readings will be in English. It is essential, then, that you learn the language well and feel comfortable taking notes, writing papers, and explaining your ideas in English.

Some international students are already fluent. They come from countries where English is spoken, either as a first or second language, or they attended schools where instruction was in English. Indeed, you may have the advantage of being able to read research materials in several languages, while your classmates here are struggling. For others, though, learning the language is still a challenge. It is a challenge worth meeting head-on and mastering. The better your English, the better you will perform in classes, papers, and exams.

Universities here clearly understand the importance of knowing English. That's why they require international students to perform well on

> [He] possesses one of the most essential qualities for becoming a first-rate researcher—originality.
>
> Her capacity to absorb new material and identify important issues or problems is extraordinary. Her analytic skills are of the highest order. She writes with great intellectual maturity for someone at this stage of a research career. . . . She sets herself extremely high standards of personal integrity.
>
> [This student] is not satisfied to simply regurgitate what she reads in the literature. Rather, she brings a keen analytical eye to every bit of her work.
>
> [She has a] keen analytical and inquiring mind and excellent research skills . . . and was open to criticism and guidance.
>
> He was consistently prepared and thoughtful in his approach to material. He has a fine critical facility, but also curiosity and imagination. He could be counted upon to take discussion beyond the immediate text, to consider implications and broader connections.
>
> His in-class participation and exams demonstrated strong oral and writing skills, and a particularly acute critical distance and perspective toward the readings assigned for each session.
>
> In class, he tended to offer the more perceptive comments, and they revealed a commendably deep engagement with the relevant literature.

Clearly, these are wonderful students, and the recommendations say that. In the process, they also underscore exactly what American and Canadian universities most value in their students.

Chapter 7

Working as a Teaching Assistant, Lab Assistant, or Research Assistant

Nearly all graduate students help teach undergraduate courses, supervise student labs, and assist faculty with their research. This chapter explains what these jobs are and what is expected when you perform them.

Assisting faculty in courses and labs can lead to a larger role: doing joint work and perhaps even publishing together. Working with leading scholars can be rewarding, but it occasionally leads to problems about who gets credit for joint work. I discuss these issues at the end of the chapter.

Serving as a Teaching Assistant or Lab Assistant

Most graduate students serve as teaching assistants (TAs), conducting weekly discussion sections and grading papers in large courses. Graduate students in the sciences play similar teaching roles in undergraduate lab courses.[1]

To succeed as teaching assistants, international students need to remember what helps them succeed as students in North America. First, it is crucial to communicate clearly—in English. Students find it hard enough to master calculus or organic chemistry under the best circumstances. It's much harder if they cannot understand what their teacher is saying. You can help them by speaking slowly and clearly and occasionally checking to make sure everybody understands what you are saying.

Second, encourage class discussion, questions, and even disagreements,

1. Different universities use different terms for teaching assistants. In the University of California system, for example, they are called graduate student instructors (GSIs).

> ***Tip:*** As a teaching assistant, it is vital that you speak clearly to the class. Prepare for each class session and encourage student participation, not repetition. Insist on academic honesty and explain your rules to everyone, in advance. If you have any problems or questions, take them to the head TA or the professor running the course.

not rote repetition. To facilitate this kind of class participation, you'll need to prepare for each session. Preparation doesn't take long, but you do need to think about what you want to cover and how you want to approach the material.

Third, insist on academic honesty. Your students should do their own work and follow the rules of citation, just as you do.

Fourth, remember that you are working under the direction of the class professor. Know how he wants papers and exams graded. If you have any questions about how to grade a paper or whether a student is cheating, talk it over with the professor. (In very large courses, there is often a head teaching assistant, with whom you might raise these issues first.) Remember, if you are not sure what to do, ask the professor.

There's one rule you won't have to ask about. All professors want you to grade students impartially, without preferential treatment for anyone. What counts is the quality of their work, not whether you like (or dislike) them. Whether you are grading participation in class or marking papers, try to give each student fair, evenhanded treatment. To do that, some professors and TAs actually hide the student's name from themselves when they grade essays or exams. They want to grade the paper, not the person.

Fifth, whatever rules you have for the class, explain them to the whole class before any problems arise. Make sure everybody understands the ground rules, and then apply them equally to all students. The same holds true for lab sections.

Maintaining Professional Relationships with Students

As a TA, you are a teacher. That's true even though you are still a student yourself. Being a teacher carries responsibilities, especially in dealing with students. Good teachers try to maintain cordial, professional relationships with all their students and avoid intimate friendships with any of them. As a teaching assistant, you should do the same thing.

As a teacher, you should

- act professionally;
- treat all students fairly and equally;
- avoid socializing privately with students enrolled in your class;
- attend every class session, unless you are sick or must deal with an emergency;
- show up for class on time;
- prepare your lessons in advance;
- give students useful comments on their work;
- turn in your grades promptly.

Graduate students are often surprised by the requirements of being a teaching assistant. They know they are supposed to teach a section and grade papers, but they don't think about any other obligations. In fact, these obligations are an essential part of teaching.

It can be difficult to be *both* a teacher *and* a student. You might find yourself teaching an undergraduate section in the morning and attending another course in the afternoon as a student. These dual roles can be confusing, since teachers and students have very different responsibilities. As a student, you are free to socialize with whomever you choose. As a TA, however, you should not socialize privately with students in classes you teach. It could lead some students to think you are playing favorites. In this case, your responsibilities as a teacher override your freedom as a student.

You can invite the *entire* class to join you for coffee or a pizza after class, but you cannot invite a few selected students. If you want to drink a cappuccino with a couple of students in your section, then you should make a similar opportunity available to their fellow students. Those who are not included in a social event will fear that you favor other students. Appearances matter. Your students should know that you treat them fairly and equally.

That's why, if you spend extra time helping one student with a paper or lab project, you should make sure everyone else is eligible for the same treatment—and make sure that they know it. Because you are responsible for grading your students, it is vital to avoid any conflict of interest, or even the appearance of conflict.

You certainly cannot date your students—for several reasons. It violates the basic principle that you should treat all students fairly and professionally, without favoritism. Is your date getting special treatment in

> ***Tip:*** As a TA, you should treat all students equally. Avoid private socializing or any special treatment for students currently in your section or lab. It's vital that your students know you are fair.

class or labs? Other students would have every reason to wonder. Second, dating your students poses a conflict of interest. Your professional interest in teaching and grading fairly could easily conflict with your personal interest in developing a social relationship, perhaps an intimate one. The conflict of interest can be even worse if a relationship breaks up. Students who end personal relationships with faculty (or who refuse to begin them) might fear retribution in their grades or working relationship. Third, because teachers have power in the classroom and lab, students might not feel free to reject a teacher who requests a date. Given the inequality between teachers and their students, we cannot tell if a student's consent to a social relationship is really voluntary. For all these reasons, then, you should avoid dating or other private social activities with students in your classes or labs.

What if, by chance, you already know a student who is assigned to your section or lab? You *must* tell the professor who leads the course. Do it right away. She can decide whether to reassign the student, do the grading herself, or make some other arrangement. That's her choice to make. Once you tell her, you have discharged your responsibility.

> ***Tip:*** TAs operate under the supervision of the course professor. If you encounter any problems in your section, bring them to the professor and ask for advice.

One final point, though it should be obvious: never use your authority as a teacher to coerce students or achieve personal ends. Be professional and scrupulously fair. Remember, as a teacher, it's important both to *be fair* and to *appear fair* to all your students.

Serving as a Research Assistant (RA)

Working as a professor's research assistant (RA) is one of the most common jobs on campus. It's also one of the best ways to forge a relationship with faculty and learn the nuts and bolts of research.

RAs work between five and fifteen hours each week and handle a wide

> ***Tip:*** As an RA, it's important to know what type of work the faculty member expects, how many hours you should work each week, and what kind of work product you should turn in. Discuss these when you begin the job. You should also make sure the professor knows your academic background and skills so he can take full advantage of them.

range of tasks, depending on the professor's research needs and the student's abilities. A student fluent in Arabic or Portuguese might translate materials for a professor who doesn't know those languages. A student who knows Stata or SPSS might be asked to run certain statistical tests. It all depends on your skills and the professor's needs.

Some RA work is routine and boring. We call it "grunt work." "Could you find this book in the library and photocopy pages 10–35?" "Could you encode this data for me?" Some assignments are a bit more challenging: "Could you find the best two or three articles on this topic I'm interested in?" Some is like writing a class paper: "Could you write a brief summary of this book and maybe find a good published review of it?" Or "Could you assemble a short reading list on this topic for me?"

Before you sign on as an RA, it's important to sit down with the professor and discuss exactly what the job entails. Is it mostly grunt work, for example, or is it mostly writing reports? Are you expected to take a lot of initiative or will you receive detailed instructions and close supervision?

Be sure to tell the professor about your skills and training. He can't take advantage of them if you haven't told him. Start by giving him a brief résumé, listing your educational background and pertinent skills. The résumé should launch a useful discussion during the job interview, one that may continue after you begin work.

In your initial discussions, you should find out what kind of working schedule the professor expects. Can you keep your own hours, or do you need to be in the office at certain times? He has undoubtedly had RAs before, and he will know what he wants.

He'll also have a good idea what kind of work product he expects. One professor might want brief reports submitted via e-mail. Another might prefer longer reports delivered in hard copy, with an e-mail backup. He'll know how quickly he wants various tasks completed. It helps to discuss all this as you begin the job. If you have any questions when you receive a new assignment, be sure to ask. That's the best way to avoid misunderstandings.

> ***Tip:*** If you are taking notes on books and articles for a faculty member, be sure that direct quotations are clearly indicated. Ask the professor how he wants you to handle this.

Finally, if you are taking notes on books or articles, ask the professor how you should handle direct quotes, as opposed to your own summaries. Mishandling direct quotations can lead to disaster. If your notes don't clearly distinguish direct quotations from paraphrases, then the professor's article (relying on your work) might fail to put quotation marks around another author's words. That omission can lead to charges that the professor plagiarized. My own advice is to put the letter Q at the beginning and end of each quotation. It's better than a small quotation mark, because it stands out. You are not likely to overlook it, and neither is the professor. (The following chapter, "Avoiding Plagiarism and Doing Honest Work," discusses this important issue in greater detail.)

Doing Joint Work with Faculty

Graduate students sometimes do research that leads to coauthored publications with their professors. It can be extremely rewarding—a chance for close collaboration and publications that advance your career. That's the good news.

The bad news is that not all joint work ends so happily. A few professors use their students' work without giving them full credit, or, worse yet, without giving them credit at all. That's abuse of authority. There are also more complicated cases, where it's unclear how to apportion credit and where the participants disagree about it. These problems sometimes arise in the sciences, where multiple authorship is common and where lab partners discuss their work freely. At what point does a comment or suggestion from the head of the lab (or perhaps from a fellow student) deserve authorial credit? Where should each participant's name appear in a coauthored paper?

These are difficult questions, and different specialties have their own norms (sometimes contested ones). The difficulties are compounded because lab members have different positions and different authority. Some, like the head of the lab, might hold the keys to your professional future.

I will not try to unravel these complexities here. Instead, I will offer one

> ***Tip:*** Before doing joint work with a professor, it's wise to discuss how credit is normally apportioned for such work. If you're unsure if his approach is fair and reasonable, check with friends in other labs and perhaps other faculty. Administrators who deal with academic integrity issues can also help answer these questions.

piece of straightforward advice. *If you are doing research in a laboratory or working collaboratively with a professor, it is best to discuss these publication issues in advance.* Do it early, before you have completed any research or produced publishable papers (or patentable inventions). Better yet, do it before you start the research. The faculty member will have some clear guidelines about how to handle credit for joint work. Discuss them openly. Be sure that you understand them and that you agree to these rules before you spend months or years on collaborative research.

If you are uncertain whether the professor's guidelines are fair and reasonable, ask faculty or friends in other labs. Again, it's best to do this at the outset, before you immerse yourself in the collaborative work.

Later, if problems or questions arise, you can take them to administrators who deal regularly with academic integrity issues. But it's far better to avoid these problems in the first place. The best way to do that is to discuss the issues openly and candidly at the outset of any research.