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Abstract

Each year, more than a million international students arrive in universities in the United States, bringing valuable cultural, academic, and intellectual backgrounds, as well as revenue to these universities. However, the values these students bring are often overlooked when universities do not factor in the life circumstances of these students, creating unintended barriers for these students to succeed. These barriers reduce the contributions that international students make to the campus community. This essay uses a philosophical and civil lens to explore this problem and argue for a civil framework to help universities be better hosts to international students, enabling these students to make culturally and economically valuable contributions to the universities.
In Plato’s allegory of the cave, a group of prisoners is shackled in a dark cave. They can’t turn around, and the fire behind them projects shadows on the wall in front of them, which they call beings. To the prisoners, these shadows become reality. One of the prisoners manages to break free from his shackles and sees the flame for the first time, which he takes a little while to get used to. As the freed prisoner makes his way out of the cave, he sees the sun for the first time; it is blinding at first but then he learns that the shadows were in fact a reflection of actual beings (p. 240-248). Like the shackled prisoners, when international students come to the United States, they may gain a wider perspective, which to them is a world that they didn’t grow up in.

International students come from diverse cultural and academic backgrounds, habits, values, and belief systems to pursue their dream of studying in the United States. As of academic year 2017–2018, the number of international students in US colleges and universities reached 1.09 million.1 (Institute of International Education, 2018). These students generate considerable revenue and bring diverse cultural perspectives and global awareness to the whole campus community. However, campus communities often overlook the value these students bring because of universities’ systemic oversight of international students’ experiences. When universities don’t factor in the life circumstances of these students, such as cultural and language barriers as well as academic and financial challenges, universities create unintended obstacles to these students’ success. When international students are confronted with these barriers, the contribution they can make to the university campus and classroom is diminished because when students feel alienated and marginalized, they no longer participate on campuses or in classrooms.

In this essay, I am advocating for the principle of civility and philosophy that reminds us to value, embrace, and be mindful of our differences, and to see people with common dignity and respect. In our universities, we need to use a civil framework that asks us to be better hosts to our international students, so that everyone can more fully participate in our campus community. Among the many challenges that these students face, I will focus on two: language and academics.

Language barriers can pose a huge challenge for international students when they come to the United States. Communication barriers which have occurred with professors can be linked to power dynamics, vocabulary, and lack of historical context. International students may feel hesitant in approaching their professors because of power dynamics in their cultures. Power dynamics here means varying cultural practices between students and teachers. In many countries like China, Chile, and parts of Africa, power dynamics are such that a “teacher-led approach” is preferred, where a teacher is seen as an expert on the topic (Pérez & Clem, 2017; Teaching Policies, 2016; “What You Need,” 2015). Asking questions may imply questioning teachers’ authority. Conversely, in the United States, classroom discussions
from elementary school to high school are generally more student-led and interactive, offering students a chance to express their ideas. As a result, an international student who has been conditioned in a more authoritative educational culture may feel shy and is less likely to approach American university professors.

In addition to the varying power dynamics between a professor and a student across cultures, vocabulary used by professors can be daunting, especially because most international students don’t speak English as their first language. Even after international students demonstrate English language proficiency through standardized tests such as TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) and IELTS (International English Language Testing System), a wide range of vocabulary may still be inaccessible to them, even before they enter a classroom. International students may view American education through their own cultural lenses, which causes them to not fully understand these complex, culturally-dependent concepts. When they come across complex vocabularies, international students may feel confused at first but then slowly begin to understand subtle meanings.

In addition to power dynamics and complex vocabularies, lack of historical context can pose a challenge for international students. Often, the information that professors provide requires historical context. An example can be learning about racial subjugation: African Americans were subjugated by white supremacist groups. The complexities of history, terminology, and names such as Martin Luther King Jr., KKK (Ku Klux Klan), “lynching,” or “Jim Crow segregation,” are foreign to many international students.

Like communication with professors, socialization can be a language barrier for international students because of their emerging language proficiency. Socialization includes understanding slang and sarcasm as well as humor and popular culture references. International students may feel shy, embarrassed, or judged by their domestic counterparts because of their developing language skills. “References to popular culture icons readily recognized by U.S. students don’t register; sarcasm and slang are often taken literally” (Kisch, 2014, pp. 44-47). Such references in everyday interactions can make international students feel alienated. For example, international students may come across the phrase, “how are you?” While the phrase is often said in the form of a statement without necessarily expecting a thorough answer (Meyer, 2010), an international student might consider a lack of response impolite.

A possible pitfall of learning a language is recognizing that there are different dialects. One study of US English argues that there are as many as 24 identifiable English dialects (Nisen, 2013). For example, an international student might hear the phrase “kick it,” for the first time and take it literally, feeling threatened or confused. Whether it is communicating with professors or making new friends, growing mastery of the English language can make the
transition for international students into American universities difficult, often causing social isolation and alienation (Hsiao-ping, Garza, & Guzman, 2015, pp. 1-9).

Academic challenges can be another issue for some international students. Academic challenges include class participation, religious holidays, and confusion about concepts such as plagiarism, citing sources, critical thinking, and assignment interpretation.

Many international students often struggle with participating in their classes. For example, students in many Asian cultures “[shy] away from putting themselves forward too actively or contradicting each other too vocally” (Rear, 2017, pp. 18-33). In some cultures, classrooms promote teacher-centric learning, where active participation and questions are discouraged. But in many universities in the United States, students are encouraged to vocally express their opinions during class interactions.

In addition to engaging in class discussions, working in groups can be a concern for students with differing cultural norms. In the article “Helping Faculty Teach International Students,” Marian Kisch portrays how group work can be a concern for some international students. Suppose a group of Saudi Arabian students are paired with a group of American students; Saudi Arabian students may not openly express themselves because their culture norms don’t encourage open expression of ideas, unlike their American counterparts (2014, p. 44). Such a scenario can create a sense of discomfort from being forced to speak for these students that are more reserved.

Another complication that comes in class participation arises from religious beliefs. A majority of Americans believe in Christianity (Newport, 2015). But in Islam, there are certain days during the week where students may have to fast or attend religious meetings. As a result, there can be times when a student may feel drained or unwell. But this does not indicate that the student is not trying. Therefore, university faculty must “concentrate [their] efforts on the prevalence of religious diversity and what that means for the student community” (Tarantino, 2016, p. 88). Before faculty can even welcome a religion, they must first be mindful of such diversity in religions in the classrooms. Civility asks us to be conscious of our neighbors’ beliefs and perspectives. If a student’s grade depends on class participation, these international students may fail to fulfill the academic expectations of the class, which may ultimately impact their college success.

In addition to class participation, understanding of concepts like “plagiarism” can be another academic challenge for international students. Some countries, like China, focus on rote learning. The article “What You Need to Know About Chinese Teaching Methods” illustrates that students in Chinese classrooms value learning styles that involve notetaking, repetition, and absorbing information given by authority like teachers. “They view memorization as a route to understanding and believe the most effective way of achieving this is through direct instruction. Therefore, students passively receive information from the
teacher” (Teach in China, 2015). Such learning habits can also be observed in Chile and some African countries (Pérez & Clem, 2017; Teaching Policies, 2016). This learning strategy is derived from repetition and memorization of teachers’ ideas in addition to the supplementary books. Plagiarism is defined as theft and involves not giving credit to the source. But for students from these countries, memorization involves reciting information while not being expected to give credit to the sources.

In addition, citing sources can be another problematic concept for international students. If, for instance, a student is asked to write a paper on “Financial Challenges and International Students,” the student may need statistics or outside sources to back up their ideas. But students in some cultures are “not used to paraphrasing or citing their sources when preparing research papers” (Kisch, 2014, pp. 44-47). This scenario would then become a case of academic dishonesty. While the information may appear plagiarized to an instructor, it can just be a misunderstanding. This may indicate that a student is simply uninformed about the nuances of US academic honesty. Such a misunderstanding can lead to serious consequences like academic probation or expulsion.

Classroom discussions in America are heavily focused on critical thinking, another concept of which international students may be unaware. As discussed earlier, there are some cultures that focus on rote memorization. Furthermore, “many studies have shown that, in contrast to their Western counterparts, Asian students perceive silence to be an important component of deep thinking” (Rear, 2017, pp. 18-33). This might also be the case with American students who don’t speak up. Inherently, rote memorization can push these students to not think critically.

Finally, international students often struggle with interpreting assignments accurately. This can be applied to American students as well, but struggling to accurately interpret assignments may impact international students more seriously, especially if they do not speak English as their first language. The assignments may consist of unclear guidelines, thereby causing a lot of confusion for these students to successfully finish an assignment. For example, an international student has received a homework assignment to solve some math problems, but there is no guideline on whether the teacher wants a student to simply arrive at an answer or to assess what strategies they have used to arrive at an answer. This ambiguity in the assignment may indicate that the student is incorrect or has a wrong perspective. In truth, it could just be a misinterpretation of the assignment. Given that class participation, lack of understanding of key concepts, and misinterpretation of assignments pose an academic challenge for these students, universities must reassess how we engage our international students.

Thus, it is clear that language barriers and academic challenges can hinder the academic success of international students. The effects of these challenges include alienation, social
isolation, fear, and marginalization. We need to remind ourselves that we have entered this era of interconnectedness and a global economy. We need international students in our universities because these students expand our global perspectives, since they enrich and engage in our classrooms by bringing forth their cultural experiences. If we do not tend to the needs of these students, they will no longer participate in our colleges and universities. As a result, we will lose not only the financial profit, but also the cultural and moral values they bring to our universities.

Universities need to question their assumptions of international students and find the courage to challenge their own understanding of these students. Because international students’ satisfaction surveys reveal relatively low levels of satisfaction in terms of social interactions and academic adjustment, universities can certainly improve in these areas in a variety of ways. They can add to their international students’ orientations by focusing on the diversities of American culture, values, and academic styles. Universities can offer writing workshops that spark creativity and critical thinking, focusing on research writing and educating students on academic terminology. Faculty and staff can have more one-on-one check-ins with their international students to see if they are doing well. And lastly, universities need to create a better, safer, and more welcoming environment for international students to thrive. In doing so, we are forming leaders of civility with a global mindset for the real world.
References


**Notes**

1. The top three countries students come from are China (363,341), India (196,271), and South Korea (54,555).

2. According to the International Student Barometer data, 60,000 international students at 48 universities in the US, UK, and Australia were surveyed to determine their satisfaction levels and willingness to recommend a university. Of these, 535 respondents were from the United States and rated 3.17 out of 4.0 on satisfaction level. The study suggests that satisfaction levels are particularly low in certain areas, such as career-related networking, connecting with domestic friends, social activities, and legal status advice (Redden, 2014).