

Rethinking International Student Support: Utilizing an FYE Course to Scaffold International Students' Adjustment into U.S. Academic Culture

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Tags

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Setting

The setting of this case is a large research university located in the Midwestern United States. The University has a student enrollment of over 45,000, and an international enrollment of 3,500. Each fall, the University welcomes around 1,000 new international students; and approximately 300 of the 1,000 incoming students are undergraduates (including both first-year and transfer students).

Case

In an effort to enrich the experience of its international students, the University's International Student Office offers various cultural programming events and workshops for students throughout the year. However, participation from the university's first-year international undergraduate students had been considerably lower

compared to international graduate students, especially for learning-focused events and workshops, such as preventing plagiarism.

Although all new international students are required to attend orientation sessions that cover administrative issues such as visas and campus transition topics, sessions were often too short and too early in the students' campus experience to know the extent to which the sessions were effective.

In order to scaffold international students' learning and understanding of the American college and classroom culture in a more sustained way than orientation sessions alone, the university introduced a first-year experience (FYE) course for new international undergraduate students in fall 2020.

The course, entitled *Introduction to U.S. College Culture*, is a one-credit, eight-week course designed to provide targeted learning opportunities and support to first-year international undergraduate students and to prepare them for a successful transition into studying at the postsecondary level in the U.S.

The focus of the course is to introduce key aspects of the U.S. academic culture to first-year international undergraduate students that may not be communicated to students elsewhere. The course is designed to help students to set reasonable expectations for their upcoming experience and increase their understanding of the key elements and norms of the U.S. college and classroom. Course designers believe that such knowledge will create a foundation for students to become successful in a U.S. university.

The course was created as a 100% online course with blended asynchronous and synchronous modules. The key topics covered in the course include:

- Module 1: Academic Standings and Expectations; High Impact Activities, Key Categories of Student Success and Corresponding University Resources
- Module 2: Effective Communications in Academic Settings (Class Speaking and Participation Strategies; Communicating with Professors and Other Professionals; Writing Professional Emails)
- Module 3: Time Management Strategies
- Module 4: Presentation Strategies
- Module 5: Academic Integrity and Preventing Plagiarism; Research Basics and Utilizing Library Resources to Conduct Research
- Module 6: Understanding U.S. Cultural Norms from a Cross-Cultural Perspective
- Module 7: Goal Setting Strategies; Career and Professional Development
- Module 8: Vocabulary Building Strategies; Final Progress Review and Self-Reflections

The homework assignments and activities in the course were designed to facilitate students' practice of the strategies and learning in the corresponding modules. Sample assignments included a formal email, weekly schedule, reflection journal, goal-setting worksheet, vocabulary log, etc.

There were a total of 68 first-year international undergraduate students who completed the course. From the course evaluation results, students highly praised the effectiveness of the course content including overall course quality, assignments and activities, course organization, quality of instruction. The mean of course satisfaction rating was 4.7, and the group median was 4.8 (based on a rating scale of 0-5; 5 represents "extremely high"), reflecting that students appreciated the content and delivery of the course.

Students indicated in the evaluation survey that an important outcome of the class is that they became more familiar with different aspects of U.S. college and academic culture, and they felt more confident and prepared

to study at the University. According to student feedback, the most useful modules were 1) Effective Communications in Academic Settings (especially Writing Professional Emails), 2) Time Management Strategies, and 3) Understanding U.S. Cultural Norms from a Cross-Cultural Perspective.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- Should this course be mandatory or optional? What are the considerations?
- What forms of support could be used to scaffold first-year international students' transition and adjustment to studying in a U.S. higher education institute?
- Based on the modules that students found most useful, what could you conclude about this institution and the international students' experiences within it?
- What types of scaffolding or information sharing do you think are most useful for supporting international students' experiences with unfamiliar higher education practices and cultures?
- What issues or factors not discussed in this case may influence international students' experiences at U.S. campuses?
- If you were to design a first-year experience course for international students, what topics would you include?