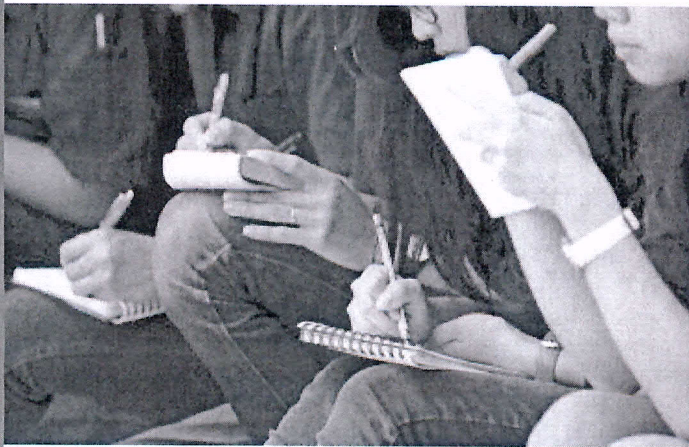


Overcoming Academic Struggles

BY CAROL SOLKO-OLLIFF

Fort Hays State University has seen a significant increase in the number of international students on its campus, especially students from China. After frustration was expressed by both faculty and international students, it became apparent that the university needed to find a way to help international students better adjust and acculturate to the American education system. A working group of faculty, who had a significant number of international students in their classes, and departments collaborated with the International Student Services Office to brainstorm how to best help international students and better inform faculty approaches in the classroom.



Two consistent observations were made by faculty regarding international students: They were unfamiliar with the American classroom and their role in it, and incidences of plagiarism and cheating were increasing. The students with the greatest academic challenges came from an educational environment that was primarily a lecture format in which students were expected to memorize and regurgitate information. The students were accustomed to remaining passive and quiet in the classroom, where asking questions was considered disrespectful. “Working together”—cheating or including the work of peers as their own work—was considered acceptable in their countries, where the pressure for academic success was high. Imagine these students in a U.S. classroom, where they are expected to participate in class, be independent learners and critical thinkers, and complete their own work. It is not surprising that international students struggle with classroom expectations, technology, the amount of reading and writing in classes, the proper citation of sources, and completing work independently.

How can the university help prepare these students for academic success? After much discussion, administrators added an international seminar class to the curriculum for international students. An eight-week course was designed with six learning outcomes to help students:

1. Develop a greater understanding of the U.S. education system, including academic policies, procedures, and expectations in the classroom.
2. Demonstrate an understanding of the negative implications of plagiarism.
3. Learn to complete research, and use that research to write a paper and give an oral presentation.
4. Show an understanding and commitment to following all rules and regulations for international students holding an F-1 or J-1 student visa.
5. Become familiar with and use student support services on campus and in the community.
6. Gain an understanding of student life, cocurricular opportunities, and the role of international students as members of the campus and local community.

The seminar is offered as a free, non-credit course, graded as pass or no credit. All course materials are also provided at no cost to students.

Now in its third year, the international seminar class has enrolled more than 340 undergraduate and graduate students, who particularly appreciate the short duration and tuition-free features of the course. Evaluations have shown, on average, that 94 percent of international student participants feel more comfortable in the American classroom; 92 percent feel more comfortable with their role in the American classroom; 90 percent have a greater understanding of how to conduct research; and 96 percent have a greater understanding of immigration requirements, rules, and the importance of that information. All learning outcomes are positively rated.

Faculty members have also been supportive of the course and serve as guest speakers on topics of classroom expectations, research, and academic honesty. Anecdotal conversations with faculty and academic advisors indicate that students who take the course have a better understanding of the American classroom. While there are still instances of academic dishonesty, the frequency has decreased and students better understand the consequences.

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