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1-1-2024

### Supporting International Students during Challenging Times

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# Supporting International Students During Challenging Times

Tips and best practices for law libraries working with international students.

BY ANNE BURNETT &  
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**T**his article provides tips about the ways the law library can support international students. Anne teaches a required course on the Legal System of the United States for foreign-trained lawyers who are earning a Master of Laws (LLM) degree at the University of Georgia (UGA) School of Law and is the law library's main point of contact with these students. As an access services library associate, Szilvia regularly interacts with international student patrons. A recently naturalized U.S. citizen herself, she shares a special connection with these students, who also remind her of the English as a Second Language (ESL) students she formerly worked with in her native Hungary. Both Anne and Szilvia regularly supervise international student employees.

## Challenges Faced by International Students

Some challenges are ongoing, while others have cropped up recently. Individuals who have spent time in other countries will likely have experienced a few of these challenges themselves.

Even a student who is excited about coming to a new country can experience culture shock. If they are alone, the social isolation that many of our international students encounter when across the world from family and friends can be traumatic. Homesickness is normal. Something as basic as finding ingredients for familiar comfort foods may prove to be

impossible in smaller communities like college towns. These students have already gone through so much, including most likely an arduous and costly bureaucratic process to get to the United States. Each year, several of our international students are delayed by an unpredictable visa system, jeopardizing their housing arrangements and causing them to arrive after classes commence. For many international students, the cumulative effect of surmounting these hurdles only adds to the immense pressure to succeed in their academic programs, and a common outcome is the fear of failure.

Language barriers cause frustration and may also prohibit international students from seeking help. Just using a different keyboard slows down typing and computer use. These issues might also cause them to opt for shorter and easier scholarly readings, which could impact their quality of research and writing.

Currency shifts, resulting in a decrease in the value of the students' savings, add to financial struggles. Many international students must seek jobs while experiencing other challenges, and they may be working in jobs that are not at the professional level they were accustomed to in their home countries, especially if they are graduate or professional students. For example, some of the lawyers in our LLM program have worked in food services here after having already worked as corporate attorneys or legal academics in their home countries.

Current events, such as the pandemic, recent invasion of Ukraine, and political vagaries in the U.S., cause added anxiety along with

exacerbating financial difficulties for international students. Changes in immigration policy cause some students to avoid traveling home over school breaks out of fear that they will not be allowed back in the country, with potentially tragic consequences. One of our students lost his mother during the semester following a break where he had opted not to travel home out of fear of not being allowed entrance upon his return.

Unfamiliarity with American library norms, such as open stacks, cause some international students to request items from library employees that they could access themselves. A few years ago, this caused ill will with staff at UGA's Law Library who misinterpreted such requests as demanding or imperious. This required education on both sides of the circulation desk: informing the students that they were allowed to retrieve the items themselves and educating staff members about why the international students thought they were *supposed* to ask staff members to retrieve the items. Fortunately, with our current Access Services staffing, this is not an issue, but we do need to reiterate this point to students very year.



### Recommendations for Supporting International Students

Participate in intercultural competency training. UGA offers a "Global Dawgs" training workshop for faculty and staff to develop intercultural competency and communication skills. It also allows participants to learn more about the international students who attend and work at the University and to learn best practices to support international students.

The workshop counts toward the university's Certificate of Diversity and Inclusion. Participants receive a display sticker to indicate that the office occupant provides a welcoming spot for international students.

UGA's intercultural training introduces participants to the [Dear-dorff Process Model of Intercultural Competence](#). Darla Deardorff is a leading scholar in intercultural competence in the educational sphere, and she worked with other scholars to reach a consensus on the elements leading to intercultural competence. Deardorff's model names several essential attitudes: respect, openness, and curiosity and discovery, with respect demonstrating that others are valued, and openness, curiosity and discovery implying a willingness to move beyond one's comfort zone. These attitudes are necessary for developing the knowledge and skills necessary for intercultural competence. The one element agreed on by all intercultural scholars gathered by Deardorff was the importance of understanding the world from others' perspectives, and cultural knowledge is crucial for developing that understanding. Deardorff describes this as an ongoing, lifelong process where critical reflection is a powerful tool.

■ **Reinforce Western views of academic honesty and integrity to avoid misunderstandings.** Not all jurisdictions share American views about proper attribution for use of others' written work. Occasionally, an international student will "re-use" entire sections of others' work in a paper without realizing that is considered academic dishonesty here. UGA's International Student Orientation addresses this issue, and students in the LLM program receive reinforcement of the importance of proper attribution in both their legal system and legal research/writing courses.

## RECOMMENDED READING

- Darla K. Deardorff, "Identification and Assessment of Intercultural Competence as a Student Outcome of Internationalization," *Journal of Studies in International Education* 10 no. 3 (2006) 241.
- Cheryl A. Riley and Marian G. Davis, "Acculturating International Students to the Ethical Use of Information and American Values: A Case Study," in *The Globalized Library: American Academic Libraries, International Students, Collections, and Practices*, ed. Yelena Luckert and Lindsay Inge Carpenter (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2019), 57.
- Frank Sullivan Jr., "Teaching International Students" in "Upward! Higher: How a Law Faculty Stays Ahead of the Curve," *Indiana Law Review* 51 no. 2 (2018) 413, 465.

- **Emphasize expectations regarding punctuality.** Some of our international students are used to start times being somewhat relative, whereas Americans tend to start classes on the dot. Orientation sessions now emphasize, early on, expectations for punctuality here at the law school and the university in general.

- **Reconsider timing of events.** We used to plan our "Just for Fun Reception" for International Students during the first few weeks of the semester, but the Global Dawg training confirmed something that we were already suspecting: students were overwhelmed in those early weeks, and a library event was one more thing on their crowded plate. Also, the Global Dawg trainers advised that early on, international students are energized by the novelty of the new environment and program, but after a few weeks, the excitement wears off and homesickness sets in, so that is a better time for a fun event that allows the students to socialize with each other. Accordingly, our reception is now offered four to five weeks into the fall semester, resulting in a higher level of participation and enthusiasm.

- **Learn and use international students' names.** Make the effort even when pronunciations are challenging. One of Professor

Frank Sullivan Jr.'s LLM students at Indiana University School of Law shared a suggestion for something he could do better by noting that "You do not need to pronounce the name correctly (we do not pronounce your name perfectly too) but it will make the students feel so much better."

- **Hire international students to work in the library.** It is worth the extra paperwork. It helps them with the financial struggles that many of them encounter while studying in the U.S., while also providing an opportunity for other international students to see them working in the library and feel more included. It is also great for American students to get to know some of the international students better.

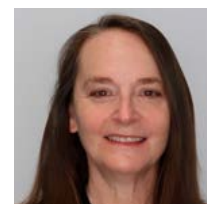
- **Use less jargon and fewer pop culture references.** Be aware that American pop culture references could confuse international students in the audience of your instructional sessions. On a related note, limit use of colloquialisms, which can be especially challenging for international students. Also, even American students struggle with library jargon, and we need to be especially aware of using such lingo with international students.

- **Add captions when creating videos.** For international students,

and for accessibility purposes, it is worth the time it takes to audit, or correct, an automatically generated transcript for videos. Be aware that auto-captioning without correction could cause more confusion if the wrong words are displayed.

- **Be mindful of innocent but possibly invasive questions.** These might be uncomfortable for students facing visa restrictions along with challenging economic situations and political climates back home and here in the U.S. A compassionate interest may seem nosy or even cross the line into unlicensed therapy if students ask for help in situations beyond what the library can offer. A referral to Student Services may be necessary.
- **Finally, promote and introduce international students to the library staff.** The more they know about your global students, the better they can support them. ■

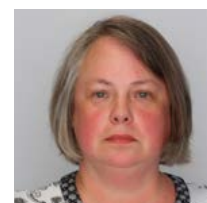
T:T Teaching + Training



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