



Teaching International Students

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In the past few years it's not been unusual for Don Bacon to walk into his classroom on day one and find that half his students are from China. "I realized I'm going to have to change how I do some things," said Bacon, a professor of marketing at the University of Denver. "If you do some things that don't work great for 10 percent of your students but work for the other 90 percent you can probably keep doing that and be successful as a teacher," he said (though he noted that wouldn't be optimal either). "When it gets to be half the class and you're realizing you're not meeting the needs of half the class, that's a problem."

As U.S. campuses have dramatically increased their international student populations in recent years, more and more faculty members are encountering a different demographic of student than they are used to – or at least they're encountering that demographic more frequently. They're seeing more non-native speakers of English who in many cases are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with American classroom norms: participating in classroom discussions, asking the professor a question, engaging in group work. [Plagiarism can be a problem](#), in part due to different citation practices in different countries.

[New data](#) from the Institute of International Education show that the number of international students at U.S. campuses has increased by 72 percent since 2000, fueled in large part by a fivefold increase in the number of students from the dominant sending country, China. A total of 231 U.S. universities now host 1,000 or more international students, compared to 135 in 2000.

U.S. universities have long hosted large numbers of international students in their Ph.D. programs, but the recent increase in international students has been especially pronounced at the undergraduate level. International students are highly concentrated in a few fields – namely business and engineering – meaning that some faculty are much more likely to encounter large groups of international students than others (though the rising numbers of international students at the undergraduate level means they're increasingly populating classes across the curriculum).

American colleges have welcomed these increases both for the tuition that international students pay and for the diverse perspectives they bring to the classroom. The thinking goes that if colleges want to prepare students for a globalized world, their classrooms should be globalized

too. But many colleges are only starting to grapple with the implications of increases in international students for classroom dynamics and practices.

“I think we’re pretty average in a way in that we became committed to internationalization, we dramatically increased our international population, but I don’t think we really understood the implications that would have on the ground level, on issues of curriculum and pedagogy, the differences in types of support international students would need,” said David Gowdey, the director of international student and scholar services at the University of Denver.

“I think in some respects we’re trying to catch up on those issues.”

A private institution offering undergraduate and graduate degrees, Denver has increased its international student enrollment from 875 in 2007 to 1,539 this fall. Of those 1,539 students, 862 are from China, with the next-largest groups of students by country of origin coming from India (83) and Saudi Arabia (76). A total of 547 are studying at the undergraduate level, 725 are graduate students, and the remaining 267 are either enrolled at the English Language Center or participating in certificate programs.

To get a sense of how these students affect what happens the classroom, *Inside Higher Ed* spoke to more than a dozen faculty and administrators at Denver about teaching international students. They addressed questions like what counts as an acceptable adaptation versus an unreasonable accommodation and whether grading standards should be consistent when it comes to non-native speakers of English. They shared specific strategies they’ve tried in their classrooms for encouraging participation, creating cross-cultural conversations, and improving the clarity of assignments and expectations. The topic of English language proficiency came up repeatedly, with some faculty describing frustrations regarding the enrollment of students whose English proficiency level was simply too low for them to participate – or, in some cases, pass the class. Denver has tightened its English language proficiency standards required for admission and now requires retesting of international students upon arrival. By many accounts things have improved, but challenges persist.

Language Barriers

Victor Castellani, an associate professor of classics and humanities and chair of the languages and literatures department, taught one of four designated “international” sections of the required first-year seminar offered at Denver this past fall quarter. The class was deliberately half American, half Chinese: eight and eight. He used to teach a first-year seminar on comedy, but he found that while he had many American students who could make good sense of something like “Blazing Saddles,” the Chinese students who enrolled were left in the dark by wordplay and culture-specific allusions.

So he created a different first-year seminar, titled “Athens to Beijing: Two Worlds of One?” with content that he thought would be more congenial for the Chinese students and that would likewise be important for American students to learn, graduating as they are into a world in which China is a dominant power. The course begins with ancient Western political philosophy

and moves from there to consider modern revolutionary moments: the American Revolution, the French Revolution and the revolutions in early 20th century China.

Castellani designed the course with an eye toward balancing out the level of challenge for the Chinese students and their American peers. This past quarter he required students to do their final group projects on 20th-century Chinese history with the idea that the emphasis on material that might be more familiar to the Chinese students would put them on more equal footing with the Americans. On issues of English language, the Chinese students were at a disadvantage: the foreign students who are placed into the various international sections of the freshman seminar, including Castellani's, are those who are flagged as having the lowest levels of English proficiency upon arrival.

"I am as careful as can be to speak slowly and to pace and to size assignments, especially reading assignments, so both groups – and they're really quite different in their ability to read English – are challenged," Castellani said in an interview at the beginning of the fall quarter. "It's a hazard: I want the American students to be challenged by this. This is supposed to be their first experience of serious college-level study. I would like the Americans to be challenged and to say the reading was substantial, not too little for them and certainly not too little in comparison with other classes they were taking, but I don't want the Chinese students, as some were doing in the comedy course, up until 2, 3 a.m. trying to struggle through tough readings."

Castellani has taught the course now four times with different levels of success. This past quarter, he said in an interview at its end, was difficult. Absenteeism was high: some kind of gastrointestinal bug was making its way across the campus. Unlike in past iterations of the course where he's had a couple American students who were interested in learning the Chinese language, in this case it wasn't obvious to Castellani what exactly it was that drew the American students to the class. (The American students chose Castellani's class out of many dozens of first-year seminars offered on diverse topics, unlike the Chinese students, who were placed in the class based on their English language ability.) As for the Chinese students, they uniformly lacked the language preparation Castellani would have liked to see.

"In the past, there have always been a couple, maybe two or three out of the eight – remember the class is eight and eight – there have always been two or three out of the eight who are reasonably comfortable working in English, whether [it was because] they'd spent some time between secondary education and college in the U.S. or had completed secondary education in the U.S.," he said. These students could converse relatively well; they could understand what Castellani was saying. This semester, he said, "I had the distinct feeling that very often all eight of them were lost."

The Chinese students in the class just did not participate, Castellani said. "Only when I called on one of the Chinese students did I get some kind of a response and it was never very long or detailed. I could sense this was very hard for them so I stopped calling on them except when we had the impersonation exercises and each person was supposed to have a turn." Some did not prepare anything for the impersonation exercises, in which they were supposed to adopt the point of view of a character in one of the revolutions they were studying (say, a French nun who has taken off her habit for fear of losing her head).

Maybe, Castellani said, the course is too ambitious: that's a possibility he's still pondering. He's game to teach the course a fifth time, though he's still unready to say whether it needs a dramatic revision. "I hope we're going to get better-prepared Chinese students," he said, adding that he also wants to serve the American students well.

Changes in Policy

A few years back, faculty at DU were concerned about students landing in their classes who were unprepared language-wise to do the work. Rick Barbour, chair of the theater department, said that students who lacked proficient English language skills seemed to be disproportionately landing in theater courses on the seeming presumption they would be easy. "I had a couple of faculty say, 'I don't know what to do with people who can't understand English': it was that simple," Barbour said.

He started bringing these concerns to the upper administration, where, he said, he was told that the best thing for professors to do would be to grade students accordingly. "I said what you're telling me is you're putting it on us to fail them in order to make the system change," said Barbour. "It was unwelcome to hear that. It seemed like the management of a policy that encouraged international enrollment was falling on the backs of faculty to somehow accommodate or outright fail [them]. It's not in anyone's interest to create parallel curriculum or frankly dumbed-down ones."

In Barbour's view, Denver's central administrators were slow to address, let alone own the problem, but he gives them credit: "Take ownership they did and there have been a number of things put in place to greatly minimize it. To be frank, it's not an issue any more."

The university made some changes to its admissions policies. Marjorie S. Smith, an associate dean and the director of international student admission, said DU initially experimented with [a video interviewing requirement](#) for Chinese students in fall 2012 before determining it wasn't a particularly good predictor of academic success (a video interview is now optional). For the following fall, Denver introduced a Test of English as a Foreign Language subscore requirement so that undergraduates not only need a minimum of 80 over all but also a minimum of 20 on the writing, reading, speaking and listening subsections. (The university already had a subscore requirement in place for another common standardized English test, the International English Language Testing System.)

In addition, Denver now requires admitted students who are non-native English speakers to take the university's own English language proficiency test upon arrival. Despite having already achieved the standardized test scores required for admission, students who score poorly on Denver's assessment may be required to enroll full-time in the university's English Language Center before being allowed to begin their degree program.

The first year Denver introduced the retesting requirement, in fall 2012, Smith said 23 of 110 students tested into the intensive English program. In 2013, when DU introduced the TOEFL subscore requirement, four of the 102 tested were directed to the English Language Center. This fall, only 50 were required to take the English language assessment, four of whom tested into

full-time intensive English. (The university had 92 new first-year international students this fall, but Smith said that many of them progressed into the university after having already completed the program in the English Language Center. The university also has a conditional admission program for those students who don't meet the standardized English proficiency test score cut-offs in the first place.)

"We've really taken ourselves out of the competition," Smith said. "If a student is looking to enroll next fall and they get an admission from the University of Denver and they get one from Colorado College, the University of Colorado, any of our big competitors, they're going to find out when they get their admission letter that they're going to be able to enroll at the other two schools but here they're going to have to take a test to prove their proficiency when they get here with a risk of having to do up to a year of intensive English. There are a lot of students who won't take that risk."

"It was a big risk we took," Smith continued, speaking this time of the university, "but we were willing to take it because we wanted to make sure that the classroom experience was what it needed to be."

In addition to changing the admissions requirements, Jennifer Karas, the associate provost for undergraduate academic programs, said the university has made changes to the curriculum. It closed a loophole that allowed students to test out of the English Language Center before they finished their program and now requires students to complete their intensive English course sequence before they enroll in their degree program. Further, upon matriculating into the university, international students test into 4, 8 or 12 credits of a brand-new [transition curriculum](#) taught by English Language Center faculty. Everyone is required to take the course on "Exploring U.S. Culture," while students may or may not test into classes devoted to speaking and writing. International students can use these courses to fulfill DU's foreign language requirement.

As for the regular undergraduate curriculum, the international students who are among the lowest performers on the English language tests are, as previously discussed, placed into the international sections of the first-year seminar. There are also special international sections of the required college writing courses that feature an additional weekly class session and extra tutoring and support. The approach has been "multipronged" Karas said, having come "out of a deep concern for wanting the best experience and success for our international students."

For her part, Karas said she had been distressed several years back to see that international students had been turning up disproportionately on the docket for the academic standards committee she chairs. The data for the committee, which deals with students in academic jeopardy, aren't public, but Karas said anecdotally she's seen "a significant drop" in the proportion of international students who come before it.

Meanwhile, DU's first-to-second-year persistence rate for international students rebounded to 91 percent for the fall 2013 cohort after dipping to 82.9 percent for the fall 2011 entrants. The 91 percent rate for international students is higher than the university's 86.6 percent overall

persistence rate, though Karas noted the difference is not statistically significant and therefore can't be attributed to anything other than chance.

"It's better," Karas said of the overall situation. "That's not to say that we do not struggle."

'In Other People's Shoes'

"It's just a challenge – how to make American universities international while at the same time not compromising the quality of the education we offer," said Jing Sun, an associate professor of political science at Denver. "It's just a common challenge to everybody."

The goal, of course, is that a more internationalized classroom will serve to enhance the quality of education by creating the opportunity for more cross-cultural conversations and a kind of perspective-shifting.

Sun taught another of the four international freshman seminar sections offered this fall, one on America and China and the competition for global leadership. The class, like Castellani's, was half American, half Chinese. "I have one principle and that principle is really to force students to think in other people's shoes," said Sun. He said that the students came to the class from very different places. The American students tended to know very little about China and the U.S.-China relationship, while the Chinese students tended to know a lot, but from a very narrow perspective: the one that is reflected in censored Chinese media accounts.

Sun described one assignment in which students simulate the annual U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue. "In the simulation what I do is I will ask most American students to play the role of the Chinese delegation: in that capacity they actually have to defend China's positions on human rights and Tibet and trade. Then I will ask the Chinese students to play the role of American diplomats, which means they will have to in a sense criticize China's policies on Tibet, human rights, one-child policy." (He does balance the teams out with one or two students who play the role of diplomats from their own countries for "fact-checking" purposes.)

The Chinese students who show up in Sun's freshman seminar are, like those in Castellani's, among those thought to be most at risk based on their performance on English language tests. Though he would characterize their English as still "below the bar," Sun said he has observed improvement in regards to students' proficiency levels over his years at DU. Like many professors, Sun encourages his international students to visit Denver's Writing Center before turning in a paper. And Sun, who is from China, noted that in his case it helps that the Chinese students can always come to his office hours and talk to him in Mandarin about tricky theoretical concepts like "realism" and "constructivism" (two major theories in international relations). Those would be difficult concepts for a native English speaker to grasp on the first try, Sun said, let alone an international student.

Sun said he thinks it's important for American educators to realize that there's a "generational difference" between the current wave of Chinese students and the ones that came before them. Things have changed since when he came to the U.S. in the late 90s, when the vast majority of Chinese students were studying in funded spots at the graduate level. Now, many Chinese

families can pay for their children to go overseas as undergraduates. “I hate to say this as a Chinese person, but with this massive increase in number [of Chinese students], there’s been a decline in terms of the quality,” Sun said. There are lots of exceptional Chinese students who are deeply committed to their studies, Sun said, but there are also a sizeable number who are here because it’s what their parents want or because they couldn’t get into a top Chinese institution.

Good Teaching Practices

Faculty at Denver described a wide variety of strategies to try to create cross-cultural dialogues and better serve international students in the classroom.

Some of it’s a matter of pedagogy but it can also be a matter of, well, subject matter. “If the subject matter is something that both sides can contribute to, then an international classroom can be very successful,” said Nicole Willock, who formerly taught courses on Buddhism as a post-doctoral lecturer at Denver before accepting an assistant professorship in the philosophy and religious studies department at Virginia’s Old Dominion University. Like in Sun’s class, the Chinese students she taught had by and large been exposed to a limited, Chinese government-endorsed view of Tibet and the Dalai Lama, while the American students had misconceptions of their own, tending to think of Tibet as a Shangri-La. By reading and discussing texts written by Tibetans, Willock said preconceptions on both sides would start to fall away (though, she noted, she would be challenged by the occasional Chinese student who stuck to his or her government’s party line).

“The hardest thing in managing the classroom is when you get the Chinese students sitting on one side and the American students on the other,” Willock said. “I’m very active in breaking that up. I really intervene. I say, ‘No, that’s not going to happen, you have to work with each other, this is a global society in a classroom right now.’ ”

"Some professors really resent having to teach so many Chinese students, but I was really flabbergasted at that attitude," Willock said. "If these students can have meaningful and rich conversations across traditional biases that block conversations, then our planet will be a much better place in 20 years."

Erika Polson, an assistant professor in media, film and journalism studies at Denver, had the experience of never having a dominant nationality in the classroom when she taught at St. Louis University’s campus in Madrid. It was interesting, she said, "not to be able to take American-ness for granted as a starting point," not to be able to assume knowledge of Halloween or "Seinfeld." Among the strategies she employed in a more multinational classroom, she used PowerPoint – “so there was a written record behind me of what I was saying” – consciously tried to avoid slang and idioms in her speech, and asked students to blog (and respond to one another’s blog posts) to lay the groundwork for class discussions. She might, for example, ask students to blog about a clip from a television show that illustrated a principle being discussed in the class, with the idea being that students could choose to write on television shows from a range of countries and cultures.

Professors talked about priming non-native speakers in various ways so they would be more apt to participate in class discussions, whether by allowing students to prepare their thoughts in a homework or in-class writing assignment, starting off class with a think-pair-share type activity, or appointing a different student to be a discussion leader each week.

Denver's office of teaching and learning has developed a [list of tips](#) for teaching international students, including, to name a few, allowing time for brainstorming, sending class lecture outlines to students ahead of time or allowing international students to record lecturers, holding individual conferences or meetings with students, creating group projects "with a fair division of labor," and explaining academic integrity standards by going over examples.

Most of the suggestions for teaching international students "are just good teaching practices anyway," said Bridget Arend, the director of university teaching at Denver's Office of Teaching and Learning. "A lot of the suggestions benefit everybody....[such as] being really explicit on the assignments and why you're doing what you're doing in class."

Dan Connolly, senior associate dean for Denver's Daniels College of Business, said that in a flipped classroom setup in which students watch a video lecture before coming to class, international and domestic students who are confused by the content could benefit by watching the video multiple times, while a student who gets it could watch it once and move on without being slowed down.

"How do you appeal to everybody with your pedagogical design?" Connolly asked. "There's this notion of universal design, where you might be implementing something to help students who struggle with learning disabilities but it actually benefits everybody. The analogy I've heard is, think about the streets at an intersection. The curb is cut so there's a little ramp. That certainly helps people in wheelchairs but it also helps people who might be pulling suitcases or briefcases on wheels."

Bacon, the professor of marketing who has had graduate classrooms that were half-filled with Chinese students in recent years, wrote a list of [tips for teaching Chinese students](#) specifically. Get to know the country, he urges. He displays a map of China in his office: whenever a Chinese student comes to visit, he asks them where they're from – having them point the place out on the map if necessary – and asks a little about their hometown.

Learn names, Bacon's list of tips urges. Use a seating chart for this, or hand back assignments individually. (Denver, like many universities, has [hosted workshops](#) on pronouncing Chinese names.) Cold-call students in class, but only after you've given them a list of discussion questions to prepare. For group work, make sure the groups include at least one Chinese and one American student. Revise your exercises to reflect the diversity in the classroom. Bacon wrote that rather than starting an example with, "Suppose Jane started a business with a bank loan of \$20,000," he might lead off with "Suppose Yun started a business with money she borrowed from her father."

Consistency in Standards: What's Fair?

In an interview, Bacon said he doesn't think he's adjusted his standards in response to the changing student demographics except for when it comes to writing. "The only standard I've adjusted that I still think about is the quality of the written work," he said. "You do get quite a mixture in the quality of the writing."

Bacon said that he has a policy of handing back papers to students and requesting a rewrite if they're unreadable (a policy that he employs for international and domestic students alike). But apart from that, he doesn't grade down for grammatical problems in his master's-level classes – this despite the fact that he used to include grammar tests in his undergraduate courses and he's even published on teaching the mechanics of writing in the marketing curriculum. "With international students, I've kind of backed off that," he said. And he feels that if he doesn't hold the international students to high standards regarding grammatical usage, he can't hold the American students to them either.

"I've heard people say, 'Well, you should just have different standards for different students.' I just haven't figured out in my own mind how to do that fairly. Some domestic students are lousy writers and some are great writers," he said.

Bacon thinks it's unfortunate that the expectation has been lost, though, and he pointed out that marketing is a discipline that depends on good written communication skills: his students will go on to write ad copy for somebody. More broadly, he mused, if a student has a master's degree from an American university and he or she can't write well in English, "Someone's going to say, 'What university did you go to?'"

The issue of assessing writing for international students whose first language isn't English is, to say the least, a tough one. "On the one hand we are needing to prepare students to write and to speak in a way that has a certain level of proficiency but we also have to realize that there are these big gaps that people have to overcome and we do value having an international student population," said Arend, of the Office for Teaching and Learning.

Doug Hesse, a professor and executive director of the writing program at Denver, has given a lot of thought to this subject. In an article he wrote titled "[Working with International Student Writers.](#)" he said that in the more than 100 workshops for faculty he's given over the years, no topic has come up more frequently than working with writers whose first language is not English. "While there's an occasional whiff of 'What are these students doing in my classes?' the common motivation is genuine concern for these students and a desire to do well by them," Hesse wrote. "What is 'fair' in terms of grading? What are reasonable expectations of ability and improvement?"

Of course, Hesse writes, international students vary in their writing abilities, and for some students who have studied at English-medium high schools, their writing can be indistinguishable from that of native English speakers. But he points out the reality that even serious study of a foreign language may not produce fluency, which can take between five and 10 years to develop.

Hesse emphasizes the need to distinguish between global problems and micro-level errors in student writing. He isolates three dimensions of student writing: “aptness of content and approach to the task,” “rhetorical fit,” and “conformity to conventions of edited American English.” He advises that professors “read charitably,” reading for “content and rhetorical strategy as much as -- or, actually, even prior to -- reading for surface errors. If the prevalence of errors really and truly interferes with comprehension, of course, that's a huge problem. However, my own experience reading international student writing is that I can follow the majority of it; it may have logical shortcomings or lack of depth that some American writing has, but I can understand what the writer is saying.”

Hesse ends the piece by suggesting to faculty that they make peace with their grading. “A paper by an international student that receives a B from me may look little like a B paper from a native speaker and writer. I'd expect the international student to be of B quality in terms of what I called above ‘aptness of content and approach.’ I'd expect it to be mostly successful in terms of ‘rhetorical fit.’ But it may be only of C quality — perhaps even lower — in terms of conformity to edited American English, as long as those elements don't inordinately interfere with the reader's understanding the content as solid and the approach as satisfactory. Conversely, an error-free paper that is minimal in terms of content or flawed in terms of rhetorical approach is not going to get higher than a C from me, international student or native speaker.”

“Is this ‘fair’ to native writers?” Hesse continued. “We can debate the ins and outs. But this approach strikes me as pragmatic, ethical, and realistic. If we want to insist that an A is ever and always an A, for all students, then we probably should just massively ramp our admissions criteria and screening for international students, dropping the number admitted to 1 or 2 percent of the student body perhaps. However, I think there would be enormous costs of doing so, and I don't simply mean the loss of tuition income.”

“I do think it's a really sticky issue,” Hesse said in an interview. “Even as I'm saying read more charitably for international students, I can hear the student, the parent, [saying] 'We're in a competitive global world; to the extent that GPA determines my fate in life, shouldn't my kid get the break that seems to be afforded this Korean student?' I completely get that and yet I keep going back to the fact that levels of language performance and to a lesser extent genre knowledges are culturally determined. These things aren't going to be completely remediated, if you want to use that term, in a couple years of college.”

Hesse echoed the point that good practices for teaching international students -- sharing models for writing assignments, spending class time generating ideas for a paper, reading a draft and offering feedback, and structuring long projects in stages -- are bound to benefit everybody. Faculty in Denver's writing program have also created [a list of guidelines](#) for assessing international student writing.

“I think the situation is not unlike the GI Bill post-World War II or the City University of New York under open admissions where all of a sudden you've got a whole category of students that you haven't had much to pay attention to previously,” Hesse said. “This is not entirely unparalleled. It's more complicated given all sorts of other things going on in higher education,

but faculty have always had to confront, 'Here's a group of students unlike those that we're accustomed to. What do we do?' ”