CHAPTER 19

Studying

Many foreign students in the United States have trouble understanding and adapting to the behaviors Americans expect from college or university students. "I am sorry I came here," a recently arrived Korean student said. "Many times I think about just quitting and going back home. It's not what I expected. At home I was a good student. Here I don't know how to be a good student, and I can't make any friends."

International students often feel frustrated and confused, lonely, isolated, misunderstood, and even abused because they do not understand how American students act in relationships with each other and with their teachers. This chapter discusses some assumptions that underlie the American system of higher education, student-student and student-teacher relationships, roommate relationships, and the important topic of plagiarism.

ASSUMPTIONS UNDERLYING THE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

An educational system is both a manifestation and a carrier of a culture. People in a particular educational system, like people in a particular culture,

may be unaware of the fundamental assumptions they are making and thus may be unable to articulate them to people from other systems. This leaves international students (in any country) on their own to figure out how the system works and what is expected of them.

For students in the United States from other countries, the challenges may not be in the intellectual realm. "To be honest," an East Asian student told researcher Alisa Eland (2001), "I think that if you want to survive [as a student] in [my country], you have to have more intellectual skills than here [in the United States] . . . . It is kind of easy after I came here . . . . It is tougher to be a student in [my country]." If it is not the intellectual aspects of higher education in the United States that can cause problems for foreign students, it is the mechanical aspects, and the cultural assumption that underlie them. For example, a Western European student told Eland, "My papers here have been more superficial due to time limitations" (83).

Using interviews with graduate students from other countries, Eland identified several aspects of the educational system where fundamental assumptions differed along cultural lines. One difference had to do with "content breadth and depth." In the minds of the two students just quoted, the American system's emphasis on breadth of learning made classes less intellectually demanding than their own systems, where a high value was placed on depth of learning—that is, studying fewer subjects in greater detail and at greater length.

Eland also identified differences in what she called "valued knowledge." Some foreign students, she wrote, "found that, in the United States, in contrast to their countries, only information that is rational, logical, objective, and verifiable is valued" (83–84). One student explained, "You have to provide reasons [for what you say or write]. Almost everything you say in your paper has to be backed up" (84).

By contrast, some students said that at home they could express their own feelings and opinions or quote respected elders or other authority figures. Such sources of knowledge were considered valid, and they did not always have to find support in academic publications for what they wrote in their papers, as they did in the United States.

The American demand for "facts and figures" or "hard data" is reflected in the corporate world, where decisions are so often made, or at least claimed

to be made, on the basis of "the bottom line." "You can't argue with the facts," Americans will say.

The students Eland interviewed also commented on differences in what she called "ownership of knowledge." She wrote, "A West African student found that once knowledge is on paper [in the United States] it belongs to the author." The student remarked that "[for] everything you say, you have to put someone's name and the date and the page, to look scholarly" (85).

Eland also mentions a difference in "theory and practice balance." She quotes one student: "The [Francophone educational] system is much more intellectual, much more academic. Here, it is much more practical" (86).

The American preference for the practical over the theoretical (discussed in chapter 3) will, of course, be evident in the educational system.

Not only are students surprised by American classroom practices, but at a deeper level by powerful differences in thinking styles—that is, the way people process information. Richard Nisbett's stimulating book *The Geography of Thought* (also referred to in chapter 3) provides an intriguing glimpse into how differently people perceive and construct reality. He and other researchers describe Western thinking styles as more abstract, digital, objective, analytical, rational, detached, and concerned with validity. Meanwhile, Eastern styles are described as more concrete, analogic, subjective, holistic, global, metaphorical, empathic, and concerned with relationships.

As people from other cultures enter the classroom (and the workplace), they come to recognize that certain thinking patterns are assumed, and that they may not share those patterns. To succeed, they need to adapt to the local style. This adaptation requires a substantial shift, adding to the fatigue that occurs for those studying (or working) outside their own cultures.

STUDENT-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

The American values of independence and self-reliance are reflected in the way that American students interact with each other at school. American students, especially at a university, generally do not go out of their way to have conversations with classmates or to begin friendships with students

outside of class. Some American students go to college classes and never speak to the person sitting next to them. In other cases, students may exchange e-mail addresses or phone numbers to form study groups or to discuss school-related matters, but such contact often takes place just before an assignment is due or the night before an exam. American students usually prefer to keep their schoolwork separate from their personal lives.

Many international students are dismayed to find that American students do not help each other with their studies in the way students in their own countries do. Indeed, American students often seem to be competing rather than cooperating with each other. International students who understand the degree to which Americans have been taught to idealize self-reliance will understand much of the reason for this competition. Another part of the explanation is that many instructors in American schools assign final class grades "on the curve," meaning that they award only a small—sometimes predetermined—number of high grades to the students who perform best in the class. When the instructor grades on the curve, the students in the class are in fact competing against each other to get one of the limited number of high grades.

Eland quoted an Asian student:

> [In the U.S.] all the students [are graded] on a curve. I came from where you always share your notes and common papers. . . . What I study for and what the other person is studying for is not going to be on a curve. . . . We would kind of divide the work up and if I wrote an answer I'll give it to my friend. . . . It was very community-based. . . . [In the U.S.] they prefer learning and studying alone. (104)

An alternative to grading on a curve is grading with an absolute scale, in which case every student in a class could possibly get a high grade. Some teachers in the United States do use that method.

Some American students may also be reluctant to help others study because they fear being accused of cheating. See the remarks about plagiarism, which follow.

The degree to which American students pay attention to foreign students, and the forms that attention takes, will vary according to many factors. A primary factor is the amount of experience the U.S. Americans have had interacting with foreign students or with other people who are different

from themselves. For instance, American students who have studied or traveled abroad will often seek out international students in their classes.

STUDENT-PROFESSOR RELATIONSHIPS

"My adviser wants me to call him by his first name," many international graduate students in the United States have said. "I just can't do it! It doesn't seem right. I have to show my respect."

On the other hand, professors have said of international students, "They keep bowing and saying 'yes, sir, yes, sir.' I can hardly stand it! I wish they'd stop being so polite and just say what they have on their minds."

Differing ideas about formality and respect frequently complicate relationships between American professors and students from abroad, especially Asian students (and most especially female Asian students). The professors generally prefer informal relationships (sometimes, but not always, including the use of first names rather than titles and family names) and minimal acknowledgment of status differences. Many foreign students are accustomed to more formal relationships and sometimes have difficulty bringing themselves to speak to their professors at all, let alone address them by their given names.

The characteristics of student-professor relationships on American campuses vary, depending on whether the students involved are undergraduate or graduate students, on their age (younger Asian students may be more comfortable with informality), and on the size and nature of the school. Graduate students typically have more intense relationships with their professors than undergraduates do; at smaller schools, student-professor relationships are typically even less formal than at larger ones.

To say that student-professor relationships are informal is not to suggest that there are no recognized status differences between the two groups. There are. But students are expected to show their deference only in subtle ways, mainly in the vocabulary and tone of voice they use when speaking to professors. Much of their behavior around professors may seem disrespectful to foreign students. American students will eat in class, use their cell phones, surf the Internet on the laptops they bring to class allegedly to take notes, read newspapers, and often assume quite informal postures.

They may arrive at class late or leave early. Professors might dislike such behavior, but they usually tolerate it. Students, after all, are individuals who are entitled to decide for themselves how they are going to act.

American professors generally expect students to ask them questions or even challenge what they say. Professors do not generally assume they know all there is to know about a subject nor do they assume that they always explain things clearly. Students who want clarification or additional information are expected to ask for it during the class, just after class ends, or in the professor's office at the times she or he has announced as "office hours." Students who do not ask questions may be considered uninterested or uncommitted.

While some professors, particularly at smaller institutions, will take the initiative to contact students who appear to be having trouble in their classes, the normal expectation is that the student will take the initiative.

While most professors welcome students' questions and comments about the course, they do not welcome student efforts to negotiate for higher grades. Professors normally believe they have an acceptable system for determining grades, and unless it seems possible that a mistake has been made, professors respond negatively to students who try to talk them into raising a grade. Some foreign students, particularly ones from countries where negotiating is a common practice, severely damage their reputations in professors' eyes by trying to bargain for better grades.

ROOMMATE RELATIONSHIPS

International students may find themselves sharing quarters with American students, whether they deliberately sought out such an arrangement or the college housing office set it up for them. These arrangements can be enjoyable and educational or stressful and difficult, depending on a number of factors. One factor is the international student's knowledge of American culture. Another is of course the American student's knowledge of the international student's culture, but American students do not generally enter into roommate relationships with the idea that they will have to accommodate an international student's way of seeing and thinking about things.

Once again, what has already been said about Americans' values, thought patterns, and communicative style is consistent with what is said here about Americans and their relationships with roommates. It is important to remember that the ideas offered here are generalizations. Individual roommates will have their own personalities, and foreign students need to keep that fact in mind.

General Comments

It is not possible to generalize about the assumptions American students make about the kinds of relationships they will have with their roommates. While some—more often females than males—may be looking for close friendship, others may simply want another person to share housing costs and may not want any more involvement with the roommate than a periodic reckoning of accounts. The remainder of this section discusses the minimal expectations that Americans are likely to have about desired roommate behavior.

Respect for privacy. Americans are likely to respond quite negatively if their roommates open or otherwise read their electronic or other mail, listen in on their telephone or private conversations, enter their bedrooms uninvited (if they have separate bedrooms), or ask questions they consider "personal." The Americans' notion of privacy generally means that their personal thoughts, their belongings (see the next paragraph), their relationships, and their living quarters are to be shared with others only if they themselves wish them to be shared.

Respect for private property. Americans generally see their material possessions as, in a sense, extensions of themselves. Just as they do not readily share their innermost thoughts or feelings with others, they generally do not share their possessions with others until they have agreed about the terms of the sharing. Roommates, whether from the U.S. or abroad, do not share their clothing, toiletries, appliances, books, and other possessions without prior agreement. You should therefore not borrow, use, or even touch a roommate's possessions without permission.

Consideration. Americans will generally expect an even sharing of duties such as picking up your things and cleaning. If there are two roommates, then the sharing is expected to be, as the Americans often say, "fifty-fifty."

Doing your part is being considerate. Most Americans will extend consideration to and expect consideration from their roommates concerning noise levels, smoking habits, and schedules for using joint facilities. If one roommate wants to use the shared quarters for a party on Friday night, for example, that roommate is expected to confer with the other to make sure that some conflicting event or activity is not planned. Roommates are expected to take telephone messages for each other and to let one another know if a visitor has dropped by in the other's absence.

A particularly touchy issue has arisen more and more frequently in recent years—the issue of hosting overnight guests, particularly guests of the opposite sex, in shared quarters. Countless foreign students have talked about the great embarrassment they felt when their roommate was having sex with someone while they were, unwillingly, present. Considerate roommates avoid imposing such situations on each other.

Directness. Americans typically expect their roommates to be direct and assertive in expressing their preferences and in making it known when they are inconvenienced or otherwise negatively affected by something the American is doing. "How would I know he didn't like the music playing loud?" an American might ask. "He never said anything to me about it."

This orientation on the part of the Americans contrasts with the orientation some people bring from other cultures, where the burden is on the aggressor (in this example, the person playing the music) to make sure no one is bothered by the behavior in question.

PLAGIARISM

To plagiarize is to represent someone else's academic work—in the form of writing or ideas—as one's own. The American belief in the value of the individual and the sanctity of the individual's property extends to ideas. Ideas belong to people; they are a form of property. Scholars' writings and

ideas are considered their intellectual property, as was mentioned earlier. Students and other scholars are not supposed to use those ideas in their own writing without acknowledging where they came from. To leave out the acknowledgment and thereby convey the impression that another's words are one's own is considered plagiarism.

International students are sometimes accused of plagiarizing the works of other people, as are younger American students who often seem to regard anything they find on the Internet as freely available for anyone's use. Much of the plagiarism international students commit (usually by copying the words of another writer into a paper they themselves are writing and failing to include a footnote or citation giving credit to the original author) is the result of habit and misunderstanding rather than dishonesty. To American scholars the notion of "intellectual property" is generally clear and sensible. It is obvious to them when an idea has been "stolen." And stealing ideas is a cardinal sin in the American academic world.

Many foreign students do not share the Americans' conceptions about private property and the ownership of ideas, however, and see nothing wrong in copying relevant, well-expressed ideas into a paper they are writing. But the faculty will see it as wrong, and international students need to know that and behave accordingly. Many colleges and universities have explicit regulations with respect to plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty. All students are expected to understand and comply with these regulations, and the penalty for noncompliance can be severe, ranging from a failing grade on a paper or an assignment to a failing course grade. In extreme cases, a student may be expelled from the college or university.

The rules for acknowledging sources of ideas other than one's own differ somewhat from field to field. Before students turn in any written paper, they should be sure they know and have used the rules for attribution that are customary in their field of study. It is part of the professor's job to guide students in this matter. When in doubt, students should acknowledge their sources.

This does not mean that American students (and, indeed, sometimes their professors and even their institutions' presidents) never engage in plagiarism or any other form of academic dishonesty. They do, and reportedly with increasing frequency. Still, plagiarizing entails risks that are probably not worth taking.

SUGGESTIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

In most cases you will find that you must exercise some initiative if you want to have conversations or relationships with American students. The latter will not generally approach international students with unsolicited offers of companionship or friendship.

Although American teachers often respond negatively to students' requests to bargain for higher grades, it is acceptable for students to speak with their teachers about concerns they have regarding their grades. For example, students may arrange to meet with a teacher to talk about their progress in class. Students may inquire about the criteria for a specific grade. Students may also ask questions that help them clarify their teacher's expectations about an assignment or the material that will be covered on an exam. Generally, teachers are willing to discuss how students can improve their performance. You can ask the professor, "How can I do better in your class?"

Asking to be included in a study group, if there is one, can require considerable courage on the part of a foreign student, particularly one still working to improve his or her English proficiency. But asking is probably worth the risk.

A noticeable number of classes, particularly in business schools, entail assignments to *teams* of students. Both international and domestic students often find these team experiences unpleasant, in part because not all students actively participate. Students from abroad will want to do their best to overcome shyness or other reservations about participating fully in their teams.