International Students and Scholars at Grand Valley State University

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Symposium on Teaching and Studying Internationally

International Students and Scholars at Grand Valley State University

Who has the best position at Grand Valley? Who has the most diverse, interesting, and best people to work with? It just might be me. My role is to work with international students and scholars at GVSU. I work with them on essential matters such as immigration regulations, social security, and banking procedures but I also do social and cultural programming and serve as their primary contact at GVSU. Really, the world comes to me. GVSU has about 150 international students and 10 international scholars a year. While these numbers are not close to where we want to be, these students and scholars are remarkable, as are my experiences with them.

Prior to arrival, the students receive a packet of information from me, including information on flight arrivals, who will meet them at the airport, and where they will live. Each year these packets require modification because of immigration changes or experiences we have lived through. For example: I had two students from Poland who wanted to save money on their flight. Unbeknownst to me, they flew into LaGuardia Airport in New York, then telephoned me to find out GVSU’s exact address. They planned to take a taxi. Well, at 750 miles, who knows what the cab fare may have been. I’m very firm now; the students must book connecting flights all the way to GRR.

Most of the international students are quite worldly, but clearly there are going to be cultural differences, misunderstandings, and occasionally language barriers. Although it is my role to help the students navigate these difficulties, I have faced a variety of similar language problems. I was driving with one of my students from Myanmar and we were driving through a part of his town and his family was following us. I was familiar with myself, and explained that it was quite a bit of different. I was quite satisfied that a year later, on the same trip, he had been in San Francisco and had seen a Fireworks what I had meant.

This fall, for the GVSU Football presentation, Coach Palowski was going Half Time Show. He thought it would be interesting of the game about chukker in light of our students, all (American, not international) explained what a chukker have coins, they them. For the event to help boost attendance of the presentation with chopsticks, coaches’ faces. The students about the where GVSU was Michigan for a One of my British coach going was stumped. They out, the British course, different.

Cultural differences the people who have similarities. Last of the semester.
from Myanmar and he was explaining to me the layout of his town and about some of the Pagodas that his family prays at. I've never seen a real Pagoda myself, and explained to him that the only Pagoda I was familiar with was a firework Pagoda—it is lit and then spins around, pops up, and shoots flames. A very impressive firework and always the finale of fireworks at my house. Well, he looked at me with terror and asked if all Christians in the US lit Pagodas on fire. I had quite a bit of difficulty explaining fireworks, and wasn't really satisfied that he understood what I meant. Nearly a year later, on the 5th of July, he sent me an email. He had been in San Francisco for the July 4th celebration and had seen a Pagoda Firework, and now understood what I had meant.

This fall, for the first time, our students worked with Coach Palowski and Coach Kolster on an American Football presentation for the international students. The students would be participating in the Homecoming Half Time Show with the Marching Band, and I thought it would be helpful to give them an understanding of the game. Let me ask you, what do you know about chukker in a polo match played in India? To most of our students, and in fact to most of the world, football (American, not soccer) is confusing. The coaches even explained what a coin toss is. Although most countries have coins, they don't all have a heads and a tails on them. For the event, I had ordered pizza for everyone. One of my students was eating pizza with chopsticks. The same event invoked surprise on the students' faces. They were informing the international students about the upcoming "Bash at the Big House" where GVSU would be traveling to the University of Michigan for a football game at the U of M Stadium. One of my British students asked if there would be a coach going to the game. Well, both coaches were stumped. They couldn't think of a reason why anyone would think a coach wouldn't go to the game. It turns out, the British student wanted to ride a bus there... of course, different kind of coach!

Cultural differences are always interesting, but the people who come to GVSU are also able to share similarities. Last winter, we hosted two scholars for the semester. To make things easier and hopefully ease some homesickness, I placed the two scholars together in Winter Hall downtown. They had their own bedrooms but shared a kitchen and bathroom. One was from Ghana and the other was from China. We were surprised to learn that the Ghanaian had received his Master’s degree from a university in China; he spoke Chinese! What are the chances that a Ghanaian and a Chinese Faculty visiting at GVSU would have both English and Chinese languages in common? They happily went in search of the best Chinese restaurants in town.

Of course, my job isn't all sunshine and green fields. Problems with students crop up in unanticipated ways. For example, one of our students from Zimbabwe had a rough first semester. It wasn't that she couldn't. She risked not only her ability to come back to the community. However, they were experiencing some medical difficulties. They had a medical emergency and called 9-1-1. The police, firefighters, and ambulance workers arrived. This is standard practice in the U.S., during an emergency; the emergency units are called and respond. The stu-
Teaching and Studying Internationally

A student didn't know this and thought he and his family were in trouble. The police don't come to medical emergencies in Korea. Imagine asking for help, getting the help, and being afraid of being arrested and jailed.

Academically, the international students do well here. Many of them are surprised by the workload. Many universities throughout the world have only one final exam per course. The amount of papers, homework assignments, presentations, and group projects definitely takes getting used to for the international students. Frequently, their first semester does not go well at all since they are adjusting to everything being different: time, food, sleep habits, professors, etc. The second and subsequent semesters though, the students begin to shine. Three of our students from Norway would tell me how unbelievably smart they were going to be when they went home. They said, "All we do anymore is study, study, study. We used to party, party, party, but now we know!"

The primary complaint of the international students regarding their classroom experience is the lack of debate in their classrooms by their peers. Of course, this is going on in many classrooms, but I found out what they meant. I taught a section of Freshman Studies for International Students where we had lively discussions regarding democracy, homosexuality, abortion, and other sensitive issues. Everyone in my class participated enthusiastically. The same semester I was invited to talk about GVSU's international education at another FS 100 course. The students were not as engaged or talkative, let alone assertive in their beliefs about exploring the world.

Recently, I conducted a survey of international students regarding services and attitudes on campus. The results of the survey are encouraging. 70 percent of the students rated faculty above average or high in services provided. Comments regarding faculty include: "You always know that if you knock on their door they will make time for you." They were also asked what they might tell a student from their country about GVSU. Some of the responses: "I do love the professors at GVSU. They are enthusiastic. Our location of GVSU is in the United States and the United Kingdom. Our international students have a higher chance of becoming leaders in their fields. Our international students must learn to work with different cultures and become more tolerant. Our international students are also more likely to become leaders in their own fields."
The international students are enthusiastic about their academic experiences. Our international students and scholars at Grand Valley have a history of success. They go on to become Presidents of Countries (Palau); managers of Human Rights Organizations (MJAF! of Albania). They become leaders in international businesses or stay in the United States where they are treasured as excellent employees. GVSU's first student to be admitted to Juilliard was an international student. Our students win athletic competitions, musical prizes, academic honors, and community service awards.

Recently, President Murray hosted the international students for a dinner. During this time, not only was he rightly impressed with the International Students, he also impressed upon them what a positive difference they make in our community by teaching and promoting better understanding in the world. He remarked, "You have already made a difference in the world, by coming to the U.S. and learning about our culture and our ways and sharing your cultures and customs. This will make a difference."

My office is filled with gifts from around the world: the lucky camel from Baghdad, puppets from Uzbekistan, a replica of the Petronas Towers in Malaysia. I am convinced, however, that the best gift is knowing and understanding the students. Who has the best position at GVSU? Allow me to submit my name.