

## **Integrating and Thriving in the First Semester as an International Graduate Student in the United States**

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## **Abstract**

Graduate school, especially during the first semester, can be challenging for several reasons. Unlike undergraduate programs, most graduate students graduate in one to two years from their master's programs. To remain in good academic standing, graduate programs have minimum grade and GPA requirements, which are typically higher than the requirements the students had to meet in their undergraduate program. These expectations in graduate school require that graduate students be ready from day one. International graduate students face additional challenges in their first semester. Unfortunately, several international students take too much time to overcome the initial challenges, negatively impacting their ability to integrate and thrive in their graduate program. This paper reviews the factors that support the early integration of graduate students in their first semester. A survey was designed to understand the factors that international graduate students perceive as critical to thriving in their first semester. The feedback from the students indicates that adjusting to the classroom is the least important factor in achieving academic success as a graduate international student. However, a good understanding of the educational system was highly perceived by the students as critical for thriving in the United States.

## **Introduction**

Graduate education in the United States has undergone many changes in recent years. Higher educational institutions offer various pathways, such as thesis and non-thesis options for master's students. Non-thesis options sometimes require students to complete a capstone as a culminating experience, while others allow students to take only courses to meet graduation requirements. The COVID-19 pandemic provided opportunities for institutions to deliver more online content, allowing students to enjoy the benefits of online education. While distance education offers the flexibility for students to complete graduate degrees online, international students continue to show interest in on-campus graduate programs. On-campus programs offer an environment for international students to explore different cultures. This comes with challenges that must be overcome for the student to thrive.

The first semester as an international student requires graduate students to learn about campus resources and how to utilize them, understand the cultural dynamics, cope with and adjust to the institutional and country's culture, understand and navigate the academic expectations, enhance language proficiency, and adapt to classroom dynamics and the administrative processes. Even though some of these factors also affect domestic students, international students have to adjust faster to thrive in their first semester.

Understanding and embracing the cultural dynamics in the United States requires international students to engage actively with faculty, peers, and staff from diverse backgrounds. In addition to regularly scheduled events such as attending classes, international students enhance their cultural experiences by participating in student organizations and multicultural events. Working in teams in graduate courses also helps international students integrate into American culture, which helps them adapt to classroom dynamics.

While international students must demonstrate English proficiency to be admitted unconditionally into most graduate programs in the United States, they sometimes hesitate to engage in conversation due to cultural background or speaking English as a second language. This may impact their ability to thrive in the first semester. Lack of confidence to engage in conversations during the first semester could also affect their ability to navigate the academic expectations as well as their willingness to explore and utilize campus resources. In this paper, first-semester international students in a graduate engineering program were asked to reflect on their academic experience to identify the critical success factors. An anonymous, non-scientific survey was designed to gather feedback from the students at the end of their first semester. All students in the class were international students taking on-campus courses in the United States for the first time. The following section presents a brief literature review.

### **Brief Literature Review**

Higher educational institutions in the United States continue to attract some of the best students worldwide, increasing the cultural diversity on our campuses. Despite their strong academic preparation, international students face several obstacles, especially, in their first semester. Expressing their thoughts on paper, adjusting to the American educational system, and asking for help when needed, do not come naturally to some international students in their first semester in the United States. Those who cannot adjust quickly may end up underperforming in their first semester. Gardner [1], and Kizilcec and Cohen [2] explain that generally, graduate students achieve academic success if they master time management, set goals, and can prioritize their tasks. Compared to undergraduate students, these activities do not always present as much challenge to graduate students, and international graduate students do not necessarily struggle to achieve them. However, mastering learning strategies and understanding academic expectations and the general educational system helps international graduate students succeed.

Academic pressure in the first semester at graduate school sometimes overshadows the importance of positive mental well-being. Imposter syndrome, workload, and social isolation increase stress and anxiety [3]. These factors impact the ability of international graduate students to thrive [3] in their academic pursuits. Stallman [4] explains that stress and anxiety levels can be managed by implementing activities that promote mental well-being. Supportive peer networks, professional counseling, self-care routines, and mindfulness can help manage stress and anxiety levels in graduate school [3]. Institutional support and advocacy for mental health concerns can help reduce the stigmatization of people who seek help for mental health support [5]. Some international students come from countries where an expressed need for mental health support is seen as a sign of weakness. Consequently, when they arrive at U.S. institutions with mental health support, they may hesitate to utilize such services even if they have a need. Such students may survive by relying on the social support they develop.

If international students do not utilize mental health support, they will need strong social support from their peers, faculty, and staff to thrive [6]. Due to the unique role of faculty members in the academic and social development of international students, understanding the students' needs may position faculty members to support the students better in the first semester and beyond. Providing opportunities for international students to engage in collaborative problem-solving, networking events, and seminars helps international students feel a sense of belonging [7]. Moreover, in smaller programs where experienced faculty members can provide mentorship, career advice, professional guidance, and encouragement, international students enjoy and thrive in a fruitful environment [8].

Professional development beyond the classroom can prepare a graduate student for long-term success. Career services professionals play a key role in supporting international students. Graduate students benefit from career readiness training, such as interviewing skills [9]. After the first semester, international graduate students typically develop a firmer footing in professional societies and start searching for future internship opportunities, which help them create career paths [10]. This experience is different from that of domestic students, who can take internship positions during their first semester in graduate school. International graduate students are required by law to be at a U.S. institution for two semesters before taking up an internship position. Martinez et al., [11] explain that resources for job-searching strategies, resume-building, and career counseling enhance graduate student success.

As seen above, thriving in graduate school requires overcoming several obstacles. Even though all graduate students face challenges, international students are impacted differently in the United States. Mastering the English language and feeling comfortable expressing oneself is a significant challenge to overcome in their first semester. Adjusting to the classroom and learning to understand the academic honor codes help international students have a fruitful first-semester experience in graduate school [12]. It helps them articulate their needs and express their views on paper. Understanding the U.S. Educational System prepares them for broader success, which enhances their ability to ask for help. The following section presents the data collection approach to identifying the critical factors.

## **Data Collection**

A survey was designed to collect feedback from international students who were in a graduate (master's) engineering program for the first time in the United States. The students had different academic backgrounds and were enrolled in a required 3-credit hour course with no prerequisite. Even though the course was on campus, lectures were recorded for students to playback, but they were required to attend classes in person. The students voluntarily completed an anonymous survey on the last day of classes (before the final exams week). The survey was designed to understand the students' perspectives on the factors needed to thrive as graduate engineering students in the first semester of their studies in the United States. Using the factors identified by Lipson [13], a Likert scale survey was created with five main themes: understanding the U.S. educational system, knowing how to learn, mastering the English language, learning the rules of academic dishonesty, and adjusting to the classroom. The survey questions can be found in the appendix. The following section summarizes the primary survey outcomes.

## Results

There were 19 international graduate students in the class, and 14 responded to the survey, thus achieving approximately a 74% response rate. In the rest of the paper, the respondents may be generally referred to as the students. As seen in Figure 1, the students identified that all five factors identified by Lipson [13] contributed to academic success in the first semester in the United States. However, adjusting to the classroom is the least important to their academic success in the first semester.

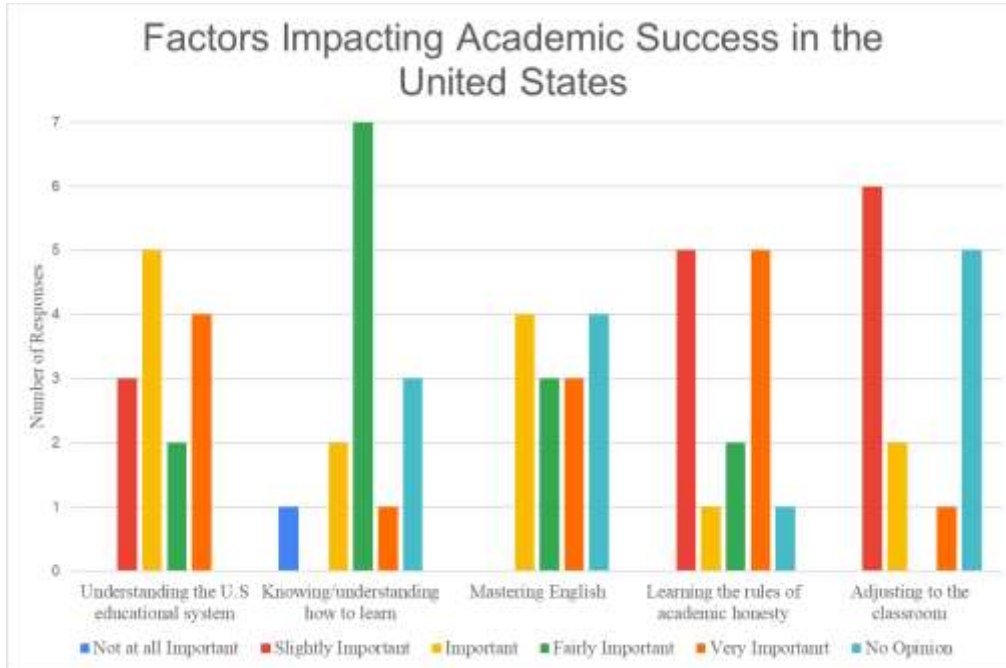


Figure 1: Factors Impacting Academic Success in the United States

Eleven students indicated that they had been speaking English for ten years or more and three students indicated that they had been speaking English for more than five years but less than ten years. Eleven students also indicated that on a typical day, they mostly or always communicate in English outside of the classroom. Thirteen respondents indicated that they were very comfortable communicating in English. Moreover, eleven students indicated that it was very easy to initiate and sustain a conversation in English. Ten students indicated that mastering the English language was essential to succeed academically in the United States.

Although adjusting to the classroom was ranked by the majority of the students as the least important to academic success, they indicated that the classroom was welcoming, and the environment was conducive to learning.

Ten students indicated that they understood the academic honesty rules in the United States before attending graduate school. However, they also indicated that it was difficult to learn about academic honesty rules in the United States even though their previous institutions had similar rules. The majority (12) of the students indicated that they found it somehow easy to express their views in writing or group discussions. However, ten students indicated that they typically

hesitate to express their views in class discussions. Therefore, it was not surprising that all of the students indicated that it takes a lot of energy to express their thoughts in writing.

Almost all of the students agreed that the United States educational system was different from the experience they had in their undergraduate program and underscored the importance of understanding the educational system. Twelve students agreed or strongly agreed that understanding the educational system was critical to academic success. All of the students agreed or strongly agreed that learning about the education systems in the United States helps to succeed academically.

About half of the respondents indicated they found it difficult to ask for help when needed. Even though most of the students indicated that asking for help was not difficult, all of them stated that they were more comfortable asking a friend for help than the course instructor.

## **Conclusion**

The first semester as an international graduate student in the United States presents enormous opportunities and challenges. Thriving in the first semester in the United States as an international graduate student requires effective time management and other skills that will enable one to overcome the many obstacles that international students face. International graduate students must overcome the language barrier, understand the U.S. educational system, learn how to learn, learn the rules of academic honesty, and adjust to the classroom. From this limited study, it can be concluded that adjusting to the classroom was the least important factor in achieving academic success as a graduate international student. The students highly perceived all the other factors as essential success factors.

For international graduate students to continue to thrive beyond the first semester, they must be supported to overcome cultural challenges, navigate academic expectations, enhance language proficiency, and adapt to classroom dynamics. Professional development opportunities that prepare international students for diverse career paths help to make their academic journey more rewarding. To thrive, one must embrace these multifaceted transformative experiences with an open mind, a willingness to learn, and resilience that will enrich the academic experience and prepare them for future success beyond the classroom. Finally, after creating a welcoming classroom environment, if faculty members desire to enhance international students' experience and their ability to thrive, there must be intentional relationship building to help the students become more comfortable asking for help when needed.

## **Limitations**

This study utilized a limited sample size in a non-randomized survey; hence, the findings may not be generalized.

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## **Appendix – Survey Questions**

### **Succeeding in U.S. graduate School** (*Multiple choice grid*)

Rank the following in terms of how important they are to succeed academically as a graduate student in the first semester in the United States.

### **Mastering English**

How long have you been speaking English? (*less than 2 years, 2 to 5 years, more than 5, but less than 10 years, 10 years or more*)

On a typical day outside of the classroom, how often do you communicate in English?

How comfortable are you in having a conversation in English?

English is my preferred mode of communication outside of the classroom

How easy is it to start and sustain a conversation in English?

**Adjusting to the Classroom** (*Likert scale*)

I attend classes

I feel comfortable in my classrooms

It is easy to find the classrooms for my classes

The classroom environment is welcoming

I am comfortable with the classroom environment

The classroom environment is conducive to learning

**Learning the Rules of Academic Honesty** (*Likert scale*)

Academic honesty rules are the same as my previous institution

I understood Academic honesty rules prior to graduate school

Academic honesty was more emphasized in my previous institution than my current institution

Academic honesty is not well explained in my current institution

Academic honesty rules in my current institution are too complicated

Academic honesty rules in my current institution are difficult to understand

I find it easy to adjust to the academic honesty rules in my current institution

I fully understand the academic honesty rules

How difficult was it to learn the academic honesty rules at the University of Dayton?

In relation to academic honesty, rate your level of understanding.

**Expressing views in papers and oral discussions** (*Likert scale*)

It is easy for me to express my views in writing or in class/team discussions

I hesitate to express my views in class/teams

It takes a lot of energy to express my thoughts in papers/writing

I easily articulate my thoughts in writing/papers

I easily articulate my thoughts in writing/papers

**The United States educational system is the same as my previous experience** (*Likert scale*)

Understanding the US educational system is critical to academic success

Learning about the US educational system helps to succeed academically

Whenever I need help in class, I find it easy to ask for help

I am more comfortable asking a friend for help about a course than my professor

Asking for help is difficult