

Current Challenges for International Students and How You Can Help

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PURPOSE OF THIS NEWSLETTER

We are all having an unprecedented year. For international students around the world, this year has brought about a great deal of uncertainty and difficulties. However, we are so glad to have many international students still studying with us at UAB, and we want to support them well in their studies.

The purpose of this newsletter is to capture, in writing, the material presented in the Fall 2020 CTL workshop of the same title. The hope is that faculty and staff who work with international students will read the newsletter or listen to the workshop, which is recorded and [available on the CTL's video channel](#).

CURRENT CLIMATE: IMMIGRATION AND INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL

One of the most challenging issues for students during this time period is related to their immigration status in the U.S. and the regulations surrounding it, as well as travel between their home country and the U.S.

In general, international students are very limited in the number of online courses they are allowed to take. In the spring, the U.S. government temporarily changed the rule regarding studying online, allowing international students the same opportunities as domestic students to complete their studies in the spring and summer online or remotely, as their respective campuses deemed appropriate. However, this summer, the administration rolled out guidance that would have rescinded the change, requiring students to return home immediately if their campus changed format for this fall, even mid-semester, to online study. The international education community responded strongly to this guidance, and fortunately, the administration changed course and retained its guidance from spring, allowing international students to study in whatever manner their campuses are recommending for everyone.

This guidance would likely not have deeply affected UAB students anyway, because we are offering four course formats this fall, only one of which is fully online. However, it is important for our faculty to note that many students feel unwanted and unappreciated by the U.S. because of this guidance, even though it has been rescinded. We want to consciously counteract this impression. We are all Blazers! More than ever, if your international students are in class, they really want to be here.

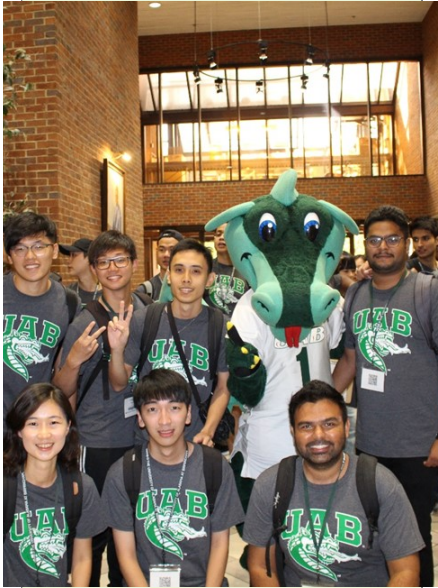
In addition, it may be helpful to know that some students are feeling pressure from parents or governments about the need to return home, but most decisions about going home are deeply complicated by questions about airport closures and border-crossing issues. Other students who have current immigration documents may not be able to return to the U.S. if they went home because of travel bans, or they may be required to quarantine for 14 days upon arrival in the U.S., causing possible late arrivals to campus. Newly admitted students may not be able to get a visa interview until late fall or early spring because U.S. consulates around the world are currently closed.

Please be patient with your students if they are affected by any of these potential challenges.



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DO YOU HAVE CHINESE STUDENTS STUDYING ONLINE FROM CHINA?

Remember that your students may not have access to programs or content that you assign. Quite a few websites originating from outside of China are blocked within China. You can try the website [Comparitech](#) to see if specific websites are blocked. For example, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Box/Dropbox, Slack, Skype, WhatsApp, and many news websites may be blocked in China. Please work with your students to help them achieve content learning, keeping in mind that even though this barrier may be frustrating, the student cannot maneuver around the system.

CURRENT CLIMATE: PERSONAL CHALLENGES

Studying abroad for a lengthy period of time, far away from family, social networks, and a sense of normalcy, always carries a risk of loneliness. This year's quarantine and social distancing measures have increased that sense of isolation for many of our international students, and many are deeply worried about family at home.

On the other hand, some of our international students are studying from their home countries, and the social expectations of family and home, especially during this season, may be significantly distracting.

A handful of our international students have encountered significant financial difficulties because of the collapse of family businesses at home due to the COVID-19 crisis. Consequently, some are under considerable financial strain, not able to return home and not having resources to continue to study.

In times of crisis, it is most comforting to read information about the crisis in one's home language. However, information about what might be happening in the U.S. may be different than news coming in a student's home language. In a few cases, for example, students have had incorrect information about the safety of venturing out of doors.

Information about resources available to help students study remotely may be hard to access or understand, so students may be unaware of just how many supports have been set up for students during this time.

Being aware of these potential challenges may be helpful to you in understanding the life contexts of some of your students during this semester.

CHALLENGES WITH TECHNOLOGY

International students are not allowed to study fully online under normal circumstances for multiple reasons. One reason is that the student misses the full cultural immersion experience of studying in person on a university campus. Another is that it is much harder to function in another language when the student is only online. However, not only do we have international students on campus who will be studying via screens more than usual, we have students who are studying fully online this semester from their home countries.

It may be helpful to know that for many of our students, online/remote learning makes it much more difficult to understand lectures. It is often more difficult to build relationships. It may be harder to feel comfortable reaching out to your professors. It may feel much harder to get questions addressed.

In addition, students may not have had much experience with online or remote learning. If they are in their first semester with us, they may not have had much exposure to a learning management system such as Canvas.

Reports have been gathered recently that some students who are having to study remotely from their home countries are having a difficult time accessing online textbooks because of copyright restrictions; others have had difficulty getting help with campus-specific applications from home. Please be sensitive to all of these issues.



INTO UAB orientation leaders—all UAB international students themselves—prepare to greet new students.

HOW DIFFERENCES IN CROSS-CULTURAL VALUES CAN MAKE TIMES OF CRISIS EVEN MORE CHALLENGING

UAB typically has enrolled somewhere between 1000 and 1100 international students in recent fall or spring semesters. The vast majority of these students are from countries that are considered significantly culturally dissimilar from the U.S.

Why does it matter to mention this? After all, the U.S. is a highly diverse culture. Shouldn't anyone be able to fit right in?

Even though it is true that the U.S. is highly diverse, even within the diversity there are common cultural values that are, more or less, held by most Americans as a value. Americans are individualists—to those who study cross-cultural differences we are considered one of the most individualist cultures in the world. Americans value equality, even though we all know that it doesn't frequently look that way and that we still have a long way to go as a society in achieving it. Americans value "saying what you mean, and meaning what you say," value "getting the job done," and not wasting "valuable time."

For our students from "high-context" cultures, there is a strong sense of safety in knowing how to act in an environment, how to get things done, and what roles and actions are and are not appropriate—to a larger degree than most Americans experience. In a time of crisis, when there is a shake-up of daily life for all of us, this can be especially difficult for students who manage best in an environment where expectations are very clear. We all feel a sense of disequilibrium right now, but the U.S. is considered a "low-context" culture. Our students who are from "high-context" cultures are affected by these things even more.

We also have a lot of students who are from collectivist, relationship-focused cultures. The isolation, and the increased difficulty of making new friends in the new learning modalities they will be experiencing, is particularly challenging.

Finally, we have many students who are from hierarchal educational cultures. Reaching out to a professor is not usually done, and sometimes asking questions of the professor for clarification is unusual. Peer modeling of the American style of teacher-student interaction may be missing this year, and we need to be intentional in helping clarify how our system works.

Are you intrigued by these distinctions in cultural values? Would you like to learn more about "high-context" and "low-context" cultures? Do you question why this article implies that the U.S. is not a relationship-oriented culture? Join the CTL for the workshop "Understanding the Impact of Cross-cultural Values" to explore these issues and more.

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WHAT CAN WE DO TO HELP?

- Be explicit. Make instructions extremely clear.
- Be intentional.
- Be compassionate, sensitive to current challenges.
- Be flexible.
- Communicate. Reach out.

The tips on these pages are primarily written with students who speak a language other than English as their home language in mind, but they are applicable to other students and situations as well

After all, the good news is that the steps we take to help international students are actually also best practices in good teaching for reaching all learners.

HOW TO HELP: SUPPORT CONTENT LEARNING

- Provide priming *for* lectures. Create study guides, provide questions that you will be answering during the lecture, and support pre-learning of discipline-specific terms. Use multiple modalities to present information.
- Make your organizational structure extremely explicit with an agenda or outline, and refer to it during your lecture.
- Be clear to point out key terms or information, as well as relationships between concepts. Signal verbally when you are giving extra examples, and especially let students know if you are sharing an extraneous anecdote.
- Be aware of your language use. This is a keen time for plain English. Avoid idiomatic language, slang, and unexplained metaphors.
- Support review of class materials. Post your slides. If the lecture is not automatically recorded, record and post it; ideally, add captions. Maintain a discussion board for key ideas, questions, and/or additional examples.

For more ideas on supporting your students in content learning especially through the lecture format of teaching, participate in the CTL workshop “Tweaking Lectures for Optional Comprehensibility.”

UAB faculty and staff work on a group activity regarding ways to improve their lectures to support acquisition of lecture content.



“Try to establish a personal connection instead of only transactional. It can make a world of difference to an isolated student.”

HOW TO HELP: PLAN STUDENT INTERACTION

Let students know that participation in class is still expected. Classroom interaction not only remains possible in hybrid, remote, and online formats, it makes a huge difference in a student's experience of class.

- Start the class with a mandated participation task. For example, ask a salient question, and give everyone time to prepare an answer and a way to share their answer via discussion board or interactive white boards.
- Break students into pairs or small groups. Use Zoom breakout rooms for remote or online students, while face-to-face students can talk to the person nearest them while still socially distancing. Require the pairs or groups to summarize, provide examples, share comments, or prepare an application activity or sample homework problem.
- Ask pairs to identify “muddy points” from the lecture for you to clarify immediately or address later. Have them submit them on a discussion board.
- Use interactive tech tools for comprehension checks. A variety of these technologies are available through UAB's Division of eLearning and Professional Studies.
- Use Canvas discussion boards actively; require posts and comments, and give deadlines for both to allow for meaningful contributions.

For more ideas on how to create interactive opportunities in class, attend the CTL workshop “Please Talk! Promoting Class Participation.”



DO YOU HAVE STUDENTS STUDYING ONLINE FROM THEIR HOME COUNTRY?

- It's a good idea to take the time to poll your class this semester to find out where everyone is, literally, on the planet, so that plans can be made.
- Students may be joining your course from a different time zone.
- Consider the effect of this on synchronous assignments, such as group projects or live discussions.

HOW TO HELP: ENGAGE WITH STUDENTS

- Plan to engage with students. Set aside time for more electronic communication and feedback than is normal in a semester.
- Assure students that engagement with you is going to be a part of the class, even though you won't see everyone in every class meeting. Be specific about your expectations for this, and share your desires for how they should communicate with you. Set boundaries regarding when you will and won't be available, but also be inviting and clear about how to be in touch.
- Participate in discussion board with your perspectives and examples.
- Respond meaningfully to assignments.
- Schedule some sort of live interaction with students on a regular basis. Be approachable! Students want to see you more than simply in videos of lectures. One suggestion is to offer Zoom open-door office hours where students can pop in and “see” you, or make appointment times for Zoom office hours readily available.
- Assume the best of international students who are not communicating and if at all possible, reach out to them. Try to establish a personal connection instead of only transactional. It can make a world of difference to an isolated student.
- If a student reaches out to you, be careful to pay attention to the message and follow through to make sure communication was complete.

ASKING PERSONAL QUESTIONS

This summer, international offices at UAB and other campuses reached out to international students with personal calls to check in on how they were faring. These efforts were deeply appreciated. Remember that most international students will also appreciate an effort at personal interaction from their instructors during this time.

Here's a casual opening question you could use: "I can't imagine how crazy it must be to live so far away from home during such a challenging time! How is everything with you?"

Here are some needs you can casually check in on:

- Transportation
- Food
- Exercise/Fresh Air
- Living Environment
- Friendships
- Health

If something seems amiss to you, recommend the INTO UAB/ISSS Virtual Welcome Desk to the student (see above right), or reach out to someone on the INTO UAB or ISSS teams for advice on how to proceed (check for roles and contact information at www.uab.edu/global). Conversely, reach out to Melissa Hawkins, the CTL's International Teaching and Learning Specialist, and she can help direct you.



POINT STUDENTS TO RESOURCES

Figuring out where to go for help in a "normal" semester can be challenging when you are not at home. Navigating a new system in a time of crisis is even harder. Here are a few important resources for you to pass along to your international students as needed:

- Share the link to the [INTO UAB/ISSS Virtual Welcome Desk](#). This is a central navigation point for all UAB international students to receive help and information from UAB immigration advisors and the INTO UAB student experience team.
- Make sure students have the technology and the access they need to participate remotely/online, as well as knowledge of how to get help.

[24/7/365 Canvas Help](#)

[ASK-IT Contact Information](#)

- Tutoring resources are still virtually available for all UAB international students.

[INTO UAB's Learning Resource Center](#) (staffed by ESL-trained tutors) is open to *any* UAB non-native English speaking student. They can provide tutoring in all English language skill areas, at all levels of ability.

[UAB's Writing Center](#) is available to help all UAB students with a variety of writing tasks.



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JOIN US FOR WORKSHOPS IN THE GLOBAL AWARENESS SERIES AT THE CTL:

- Please Talk! Promoting Class Participation
- Tweaking Lectures for Optimal Comprehensibility
- Understanding the Impact of Cross-cultural Values
- Growing in Intercultural Competence
- Helping International Students Avoid Plagiarism
- Addressing Student Concerns with Cross-cultural Sensitivity
- Exploring UAB International Student Backgrounds
- Managing Group Work with Cross-cultural Savvy
- Supporting the Development of Critical Thinking Skills

For workshop descriptions and registration, please visit www.uab.edu/ctl