

Getting Used to the U.S.

Transitions for International Students

Graduate school is tough for everyone. But if you're an international student, in addition to the tests, the readings, the assistantships, you have to face the added pressures of immigration paperwork and getting used to a foreign, often confusing, culture. All international students – no matter how similar their home countries may seem to the United States – will go through an adjustment period, says Leigh Poole, director of International Student Life (ISL). The ISL office and the University have many resources to help smooth the transition.

Culture Shock

When they reach a new country, many international students feel excited. But it's also normal to feel frustrated, confused, afraid, anxious, homesick and overwhelmed by the workload of graduate school. Many students are nervous about their ability to communicate with others and unsure of how to follow the "unwritten rules" of American culture, which leaves them feeling isolated and, after a while, depressed. You may be embarrassed to admit that adjusting is difficult, but you should know that everyone in your situation feels the same way; many others are simply too embarrassed to admit it, too, assures Poole.

Even if you know a lot about the country to which you move, you will experience a loss of the familiar, psychologists say, which creates a sense of disorientation. The well-known faces, relationships and even the physical environment – from familiar weather to user-friendly public transportation networks – are gone.

Generally, international students experience four phases of culture shock, according to Poole:

1. **Honeymoon:** In this phase, you feel exhilarated to be in a new country. Everything is new, different and wonderful. The transition seems to be going smoothly.
2. **Hostility:** Something goes wrong at school or work. You miss being surrounded by people who care about you and resent that no one in this country seems to understand you, whether it's because of their illogical language or their illogical customs.

3. **Humor:** At this stage, you start to make fun of Americans and their inscrutable cultural habits. You also start to see the humor in some of your own early mistakes in the new culture.

4. **Home:** In the home phase, you start to reconcile some of the issues that frustrated you early on. You accept that many things are different here: some for the better, others for the worse. You have learned ways to negotiate the cultural, language and logistical challenges.

Ultimately, says Poole, international students will find that they have good days and bad. Some days you will feel on top of the world because you aced a test or an assignment or figured out how to get to the grocery store on the bus. Other days, you might struggle to express yourself in class or your major professor may get upset with you. Remember, you have good days and bad at home, too; it's just that here, your successes and failures feel more intense because you are in an unfamiliar place without your traditional support network.

Common Obstacles for International Students

Two of the greatest hurdles international students find they must clear are expressing themselves clearly in a second language and making friends with Americans. Your language skills will naturally get better over time in the course of going to lectures, taking notes, doing assignments and taking tests in English. In the meantime, you may need to be a little insensitive to people who might make fun of your English. Remind yourself that you are learning a valuable skill and gaining experience that will make you very attractive to employers.

Making friends in the United States, where casual interactions are the cultural norm, can be difficult says Poole. When someone asks you how you're doing, all he or she really wants to hear is "fine." And most Americans will want to spend leisure time with you in a low-commitment setting, at least at first. That means two things for international students, says Poole. First, you will probably have to be the one who extends the offer of friendship

Second, start by asking someone if he or she would like to meet you for coffee. If you find that you have interests in common, invite your new acquaintance to lunch or a casual get-together. Again, you will have to prepare yourself for the possibility of rejection.

Getting into the Swing of Things

Many international graduate students make the mistake of staying in their dorm rooms or apartments, studying and communicating exclusively with family and friends from home. Academics are important, but you should also experience social life while you're in a different country.

It's tough to make yourself get out there, but there are opportunities on campus that can make it a little easier to meet people and get involved:

- International Student Life sponsors Coffee Hours in Memorial Hall every Friday from 11:30 a.m.-1:30 p.m.
- Visit the international student lounge in 210 Memorial Hall, open from 8 a.m.-midnight, with quiet study hours in the mornings and a television tuned to non-U.S. channels, plus magazines and newspapers from around the world.

- Throughout the year, ISL also holds an international Thanksgiving Feast and an on-campus international festival called World Fest, participates in International Education Week, hosts professional development seminars with the UGA Career Center and other departments and sponsors an off-campus international festival, Street Fest, in downtown Athens (<http://www.uga.edu/isl/events/evemain.html>).

- Sign up for the ISL listserv, which emails announcements about activities, opportunities and lectures of interest to international students.

- Visit the Campus Life Web page (<http://www.uga.edu/campuslife>) for a list of organizations you can join, some of which are designed specifically for international students or for students from a particular country or region of the world. ■

Based on the Graduate School seminar "Cultural Transitions for International Graduate Students" by Leigh Poole, director of International Student Life. To view this seminar in full, visit <http://www.grad.uga.edu>.

Where to Get Help

Still need more help getting used to student life at UGA? There are several offices that offer helpful services:

- Office of International Student Life (Memorial Hall; <http://www.uga.edu/isl>): new student orientation spring, summer and fall semesters, help with off-campus housing, tax workshops for international students, student advising, cross-cultural adjustment counseling and training, and an international graduation ceremony.
- Office of International Education (Barrow Hall; <http://www.uga.edu/oie>): student, scholar and immigration services.
- University Health Center (<http://www.uhs.uga.edu>): physical and mental health treatment and prevention services, including counseling and support groups.
- Career Center (Clark Howell Hall; <http://www.career.uga.edu>): help with resumes, cover letters and job searches.
- Division of Academic Enhancement (Milledge Hall; <http://www.uga.edu/dae>): assistance with class work, study skills and writing, including ESL specialists in the Writing Lab.