# Beyond International Admission:
# Building a Successful International College Student

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Thank you, Bill, for the kind introduction. I am most grateful to you for the invitation to speak to this remarkable gathering. I have had the pleasure of talking to many conference participants during these two days, conversations that have made me more hopeful than ever.

We face great challenges as a species, as inhabitants of this fragile planet: global warming, unstable energy sources, shrinking sources of fresh water, ethnic conflict, and partisan distrust. We cannot, and we will not, solve these problems either as individuals or even as nations. They require that we all contribute, across borders and continents.

Benjamin Franklin once mused to his fellow signers of the Declaration of Independence: "We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately." And so it goes with our global future. This gathering makes clear that we would rather work together, for surely greatness awaits a truly global village. What you do is not just important, it literally will save us all.

I have been asked to offer some musings of my own this morning, in these few minutes as you crave lunch over words. I have spent much of the last decade thinking about, and writing about, how students can make the most of higher education. And I'll spend my time now applying this to our international student population, I hope in a way that provokes good questions and then good programming. So I look forward to your questions, stories, and description of best practices.

Setting the table for the importance of international undergraduate student success should not take long in this company. We all know the remarkable growth in student enrollments from overseas, particularly from South Asia and the Far East. We know that these students are ambitious, hard working and conscientious.

I know this most recently thanks to my work at Marks Education, an educational counseling and test preparation service, helping students around the world with testing and admissions at every level: prep school, college, graduate and professional schools. We also serve first generation students pro bono through College Directions, our non-profit. We coach students like Aditya, living in Delhi and

eager to study economics at a top US college. I worked with Ian in England last month through Skype, as he finished his applications to Yale and Harvard. I know these kids are amazing.

And we know the value that comes from happy experiences: enriched talents, closer cultural ties, and unlimited opportunities for joint discovery and problem solving. I have no doubt that an international consortium of engineers will be needed to find sustainable energy sources and inexpensive desalinization technologies.

We know the cost of failure is too high for visiting international students. It will bring financial distress, professional chaos, immigration troubles, and personal shame. Academic and personal failure for these students has wider reverberations: strained bilateral relations, damage to mutual academic reputations, and doubts about the wisdom of foreign exchange.

Despite the importance of academic outcomes to this international enterprise, we have two critical obstacles in our path: ignorance and inaction. We have not done well to know the scope of this problem, generally failing to track academic performance for internationals. I distinguish this from satisfaction, though I'm happy to see that ISB may be a rich data source for this.

I cannot say this categorically, of course, and I'm happy to be proven wrong. But I have not yet found a reliable or comprehensive data source on international academic performance or even retention figures for these students. Scholarship in this area is scattered and incomplete, so we do not have our arms around the scope, depth or complexities of the problem.

Second, we don't do much about the academic needs of internationals. Again, my perspective is limited to my own study of liberal arts colleges—a project I did for last year's NAFSA conference—and my own experience as an academic dean at Johns Hopkins University.

Colleges generally prioritize the immediate legal, personal and cultural needs of international students. They offer programs and staffing to address visa issues, the logistical challenges of transportation and lodging, and the cultural challenges of better understanding and communication.

Naturally, it is impossible to succeed academically without addressing these issues, a point I will underscore shortly. But they do not necessarily underpin a successful academic experience directly. (I'd be happy to share some of my findings in the Q&A, if you're interested.)

Instead, as I can attest having advised hundreds of students, particularly from Korea (this is a specialty that comes from having K-L as your part of the alphabet!), we generally treat students from overseas as we would other students.

We might quickly note the accent, struggles with English, or excessive interest in the sciences. But we come to these meetings without adapting to the audience, for the most part.

At Hopkins, we would flag internationals in danger of academic probation, knowing their immigration status would be in jeopardy, too. I did this to avoid the wrath of our mutual friend, Nick Arrindell. But we did little else to account for their special challenges to success.

So allow me to use my time this morning to do just that. As Bill has noted, I am the author of a book on academic success, "Dean's List: 11 Habits of Highly Successful College Students." It is targeted at domestic students primarily, although international students have found it very useful. Indeed, it has been translated into Chinese and is available for sale in Taiwan.

What I would like to do is to bend my book's messages slightly, to adapt the "habits" to a more global context. Not to worry. I am as eager for an Indonesian lunch as you are. So I will not list them all, and I invite you get the book for yourself. I will mention six of them, which I hope will be more than enough to provoke conversation.

**Habit #1: Focus on Learning, Not on Grades.** There are many cultural shifts that international students must endure to thrive in an American college, but this might be the most difficult. Americans don't do it very well, either.

Many school systems around the world focus heavily on measured outcomes, most commonly on standardized tests. Successful students learn to master these exams, pouring their preparation and skills into getting scores worthy of advancement.

Yet a powerful predictor of success is putting such scores and grades into context, and gaining ownership over the learning process. American faculty resent students who only seek a good grade, never minding that the process of teaching calls for both participation in discovery—itself risky and not clearly translated into good grades—and for disciplinary respect.

Perhaps American professors are too sensitive, but they want their students to like the topic, enjoy the lessons, and appreciate the joys of the subject matter. As a practical matter, they want students to work hard throughout the term, doing well on each assignment.

Many international students ignore these smaller steps, believing they are distractions from the final exam—which they plan to ace. That does not always work, resulting in misunderstandings and poor grades.

The international student, then, must see the importance of process to higher education in America. He or she must embrace participation and the values held dear by faculty of learning for its own sake. Professors are not going to bend on this, and they should not have to.

**Habit #2: Build an Adult Relationship with Your Parents.** This generation of students loves their parents. That's very nice. They talk constantly. They email and text. They share decision making everything including what courses to take. They compare notes on grades and reviews about the cafeteria food.

For international students, particularly those from traditional cultures, this contact takes on even deeper meaning. Students so far from home, in an alien culture, to fulfill clear family obligations and ambitions, will have even stronger strings attached to them than their American peers do.

Yet this attachment could have more damaging effects than the slowed growth of maturation and independent thinking that Americans often face. Very strong parental control can result in serious miscalculations that can endanger academic success.

Some examples: Intent on having an American education "pay off," a Korean family insists that their daughter major in Biology. Not knowing that medical schools readily accept other majors, this family gives the girl a simple choice when she expresses an interest in Sociology: Major in Biology or come home.

A young man from Shanghai is struggling with self-doubt and depression for the first time—not a surprise as mental health issues often emerge in late adolescents. His parents keep asking him how he is doing. He has to put them off again and again.

He knows they would find counseling shameful to the family, so he stays away. Soon, he is staying away from class, from friends, from help. And he fails out—a true dishonor.

As educators, we do not serve our international students well if we do not consider their family relationships and help them to manage them toward success. This might better begin with educating families than it does with orienting students. Parent programming is rarely tailored for international audiences. Perhaps it should be fundamental.

**Habit #4: Approach the Curriculum Like a Great Feast.** American colleges and universities rest on a deep and historic commitment to a liberal education. This commitment does not just reflect our history, it also reflects our values, including skepticism and intellectual freedom.

Movement around and between disciplines not only nurtures creativity and novel ways of solving problems, it helps students to cast doubt on what they think and to express themselves in fresh and contrarian ways.

As any international student advisor can tell you, most of their advisees do not get this. They do not understand the tradition. They look skeptically at its utility. And they are on a focused mission for credentials and accomplishment that has no room for exploration and serendipity.

Again, this can result in disaster. International students may be particularly well equipped to stick to their original plan and ignore the rich offerings around them. But I have found that the plans of adolescents, backed by ambitious but poorly informed parents, can force a student into studies for which they lack interest and talent. And that usually ends in struggle and failure.

More broadly, failing to appreciate the freedom of choice and the intellectual flexibility of the liberal arts begs the question: "Why study in the US at all?" If you are going to come to the US, why not take full advantage of its greatest learning resource? It would be like traveling to France but insisting on eating McDonald's everyday. What is the point?

Colleges, associations like NAFSA and NACAC, and government agencies like EducationUSA all work on spreading this message. But that message is generally pitched as an invitation to study here, rather than as a concern that could result in academic failure. And sometimes a threatening message can be more powerful.

**Habit # 5: Understand that Majors and Careers are Not the Same Thing**. A major is widely believed to be the most important feature of an American college education. It guides you. It pushes you. It defines you. "What's your major?" may be the oldest and most ineffective pick up line in history, but it's a good question if you think the answer is that important.

Picking a major, logically, would be the most important decision you make in college. And it would appear that if a major defines your undergraduate experience, then it must have an effect on your career choices.

How could it be otherwise? If you get a BA in Biology or Economics, doesn't that make a difference to the future? Doesn't this give you skills and credentials for professional advancement?

There could not be a greater misunderstanding about American undergraduate education than this one. In fact, majors have nothing to do with professional preparation.

Majors are simply teaching devices, creating some order in the chaos of a liberal education. They prompt students to see what is like to crawl into a discipline, but offer no promise at all of expertise of applicable skills.

An example. An Economics major at Johns Hopkins needs to take just 11 semester courses—less than 30% of all courses needed for a degree. Those 11? Intro to Macroeconomics, Intro to Microeconomics, Micro and Macro Theory, Statistics, Calculus 1, 3 200-level courses, and 2 300-level courses.

You could argue that only the 300-level courses are truly substantive, with all the others needed just to understand those TWO courses. Would you trust this student with running the Federal Reserve? I don't think so.

I'll grant you, this is an extreme example, and other majors require more coursework, theses and so on. But the outcome is roughly the same: a well-educated college graduate who understands a field of study but is nothing that would resemble an expert.

This outcome makes sense, of course, when you consider the history of American higher education and the tradition of a liberal education. Many colleges were founded to educate ministers of the church or to build a broadly educated electorate. We do not use undergraduate studies to prepare professionals nor to train workers.

And yet the mythology of majors lives on. Students, particularly internationals, continue to think that their future turns on this choice. And this perception traps them in courses of study that may not even suit them.

We would do well to educate international families about the meaning of majors, if only to free their children to choose where they will thrive. And that, coupled with good experiences outside of classes, will result in professional success.

**Habit #6: Don't Just Work Hard, Work *Smart*.** Freshman year is a pivot point for American students. With little introduction, we demand that they adjust to a wholly new learning environment, quite different from high school. Some of those differences?

- *Professors are not teachers*. College professors would like you to learn. But they're not paid to make sure that happens. That's your job.
- *Lectures are not spectacles*. It may look like a lecture is a show where you take notes. But it is really one side of a conversation, demanding your engagement.
- *Time is unstructured*. Without daily classes and required attendance, colleges offer the pleasures and disasters of an unstructured schedule.

- *Wow, this is a big place!* Universities can be hundreds of times bigger than a high school, with complex organizations where you get lost easily.

Now, imagine understanding all of these differences in an alien language and on the other side of the planet. The challenge reminds me of former Texas Governor Ann Richards' quip about working women, referring to a great Hollywood dance team: "After all, Ginger Rogers did everything that Fred Astaire did. She just did it backwards and in high heels."

A particularly important challenge is adjusting to a new style of studying. Here, American and international high school students may share a common, problematic habit: relying on memory.

They have seen success in secondary school by using their young brains and their persistence to memorize everything: dates, names, concepts, formulae, atomic weights, cellular processes, everything.

Some traditional cultures put a great premium on rote learning. They reward and honor students who can memorize and recall quickly. Such skills are generally vital to excelling at the testing that typify such educational systems.

But American professors expect a lot more than that. Certainly, they want command of key facts. They will ask for more than a quick explanation of significance. In fact, they want you to connect ideas, apply them to new situations. Students must use judgment and imagination to solve problems, not just the recall of germane facts.

Successful college students must be strategic, too. They must think about what is important and consider how to connect disparate pieces of the learning experience: readings, lectures, discussions, papers, exams.

Professors often ask students to weave a narrative from threads found in all of these venues. It is not enough to rely on one source of information.

Again, this approach to learning and intellectual engagement may leave international students flatfooted, shocked by their poor preparation. They may flee to quantitative or scientific fields, thinking those are immune to this intellectual chaos, but they will be equally disappointed. To ace Organic Chemistry, you don't memorize formulae. You learn how to solve problems.

**Habit #10: Cope with Failure by Rebuilding and Forgiving.** We know that students, even at elite universities, can struggle and fail. We know that many colleges suffer from attrition and retention problems as their students lose confidence and good standing. As I've said, what we don't fully know is where international students fit into this population.

But experience and common sense tell us that international students are far from immune to the many and varied causes of academic distress: depression, failed romantic relationships, drug and alcohol abuse, mismanaged curricula, troubled parental relations, lack of motivation, poor time management, and weak study skills and talent—among other reasons.

I think my book "Dean's List" is powerful because it takes academic failure seriously. I don't simply offer tips to get an A. I don't even care if students get A's. I am more concerned with a richer definition of "success"—one grounded in learning and curiosity—and with what you do when you fail.

To that end, I would suggest we do a poor job by our international students. We offer them the full range of supportive programs and offices—counseling, career services, health clinics, substance abuse programs—but we don't always make sure they use them.

We might refer them to a writing center—an effective tool, particularly for non-native speakers—but we don't consider how the causes of their failure could be different from domestic students. This might involve a combination of skill deficiency, often in English, and a deep sense of isolation.

I'm pleased to report that my survey of liberal arts colleges showed that colleges try to tackle these issues directly.

Where we could have a greater impact, though, as educators and representatives of other countries, is in opening a wider conversation about failure generally and academic distress specifically.

People don't want to speak of it, for understandable reasons, but it is when we make normal the possibility of failure that we create the preconditions for recovery and forgiveness.

If we greet academic failure with understanding, not anger, with empathy not shame, with support not punishment, we create a safer environment to admit to our failings and get help.

Just as important, we will begin to see our international students as the real humans they are. Truth be told, we are in awe of these students. We marvel at their courage to study in a foreign land. We appreciate that they are asked to study exclusively in a foreign language. We are impressed by their credentials, by their drive, and by their talents.

So we have trouble seeing that they are vulnerable, scared, poorly informed about their opportunities, and just as likely—maybe more likely—to be unforgiving

of their own failures. We will do well to embrace them as the daughters and sons or our neighbors, in need of our support and our love.

Thank you so much. I have business cards, a few copies of my book, "Dean's List," and I invite you to visit the Marks Education website at www.markseducation.com. I'd be grateful for your questions now, and any conversations over lunch and beyond.