

By Marian Kisch

Helping Faculty Teach International Students

ON A U.S. CAMPUS a female student from the United States is assigned to head a group in which Saudi men are participants. A Japanese woman complains about the directness and perceived bossiness of team members in a class project. An international student is confused about references, such as *Daisy Duck*, that were used in a lecture.

Cultural differences are only one of several challenges facing college and university instructors as more and more international students arrive on their campuses.

The increase has been significant over the past several years—from 191 in 2006 to 497 in 2013 at James Madison University (JMU) in Harrisonburg, Virginia, from 220 in 2007 to 520 in 2014 at the University of San Diego (USD), from 293 in 2005 to 436 in 2013 at the University of St.

Thomas (UST) in St. Paul, Minnesota, and from 561 in 2008 to 1158 in 2013 at the University of Tulsa, Oklahoma (TU). In fact, TU ranks fifth in the nation for the largest percentage of international undergraduate students by *U.S. News and World Report*. At Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) in Richmond, Virginia, more than 1,500 international students are now studying at the institution, up almost 35 percent from 2006.

Students in the United States hail from more than 60 countries, but Saudi Arabia and China are the predominant ones. India, Vietnam, South Korea, Mexico, Kuwait, Angola, Oman, and Canada are also well represented.

Business and engineering are the top choices for international students. At TU petroleum engineering accounts for more than half the international population (many students are sponsored by their governments or oil companies), with business programs growing in popularity, especially by the Chinese.

“The faculty is looking at substantial changes in enrollment of international students within a short period of time,” Cheryl L. Matherly, vice provost for global education at TU, says. At the same time, she points out that the impact on enrollment is not equally distributed across the TU campus. Business has seen a spike of 50 percent and petroleum is oversubscribed. Arts and science classes are rising, but there’s been little impact on computer science.

“It’s never been an issue,” she says, “that international students shouldn’t be here; rather, teachers are concerned how to deliver the best quality education.”

With All This Diversity

With all this diversity, what challenges do university professors face when dealing with international students in their classrooms? Academic integrity ranks number one, relating mostly to plagiarism and citation. Lori Friedman, director of international student services at UST, says: “Many students come from countries where they are taught to spit back what the experts—professors—tell them. They’re not used to paraphrasing or citing their sources when preparing research papers.”

Many live in a “collectivist” society where not sharing answers is going against the cultural norm, she says. “Here we call it cheating; they call it sharing.”

Amber Bennett Hill, director of international student and scholar programs at VCU, agrees. “International students come with different expectations about what is acceptable and what is cheating. Americans learn about plagiarism from kindergarten, whereas students from other countries may be used to citing facts without citing sources.”

Group work is another source of concern. Cultural norms, such as the separation of women and men in countries like Saudi Arabia, can lead to difficulties when working on a project with U.S. students. And the way Americans work in groups is foreign to some international students who are reluctant to express their own opinions because that may be discouraged in their home countries.

At USD a Japanese student was upset about the perceived bossiness of the people in her group, according to Greg Grassi, associate director, office of international students and scholars. In Japan, tasks were assigned in

To promote academic success for international students, Virginia Commonwealth University has implemented a holistic plan since August 2013.

different ways and the student was trying to navigate the process so she could contribute and disagree without of-



