

How to best assist International Dukes

Background Info:

As of Fall 2017, JMU is home to 551 international students coming from 66 countries. Most international students are the top students from their schools and even in their country and may be the only ones on campus representing their country. As bright and special as they are, at times it is challenging to express themselves the same way they were used to due to language fluency, cultural differences or inability to relate to the context. These obstacles might even be harder to overcome within the first few weeks of being in a new environment.

Low energy level might be caused by:

- Jetlag, new climate/weather, homesickness, adjustments
- Being here 3 days earlier than the other Freshmen to attend “Transitions” (International Student Orientation Program)
- Recovering from a long trip, 10+ hours on the plane(s)

Take a deep breath and slow down:

- When possible, try to slow down when giving either public or private instructions, explanations, or in general when conversing with international students. This can be tremendously helpful.
- Don't be afraid to repeat things.
- Reinforce visually what you said verbally by: writing things down, or by showing them where things are on a map for example. Campus orientation is particularly applicable to most international students as they will most likely have not been on-campus prior to their first day.
- Allow time for them to understand and think about what/how they want to respond. Awkward silence often means international students are processing the information and thinking of the most eloquent response. Try to wait until they reply before continuing the conversation.
- If you've ever taken a foreign language course, simply think of that same situation when you have the knowledge and the ability to speak what's on your mind, but you still just need a quick moment to formulate the right sentences.

Don't:

- Generalize. “Is it true that... Asians are good at math?” Don't assume that all students from a country or culture will behave or respond the same way. Likewise, do not expect a student to know what everyone in her/his country think about a topic. Like in the U.S., perspectives vary from region to region and group to group in any country.

- Focus on the accent. “Your accent is so cool... what accent is that from?”

Do:

- Be curious. “What are some dishes that your country/region is most famous for?”, “Can you teach me how to say hello in your language?”
- Connect on common topics. “Did you know that there are quite a few international food options on campus?”, “What do you think of JMU campus?”
- Listen and check for understanding. “Do you need me to explain it again?”, “Did I speak too fast?”, “Should I try to explain it in another way?”

Some students can be perceived as being shy because:

- They hesitate to ask as they may not remember the right word, fear of how they might sound to native speakers, afraid of not speaking quickly enough.
- Some cultures tend to encourage a certain degree of shyness as an expression of modesty.
- Lack of smile and facial expression does not always mean unhappiness.

Limit cultural references:

JMU is known for overusing acronyms. Let’s try to fully explain that each acronym stands for and repeat the explanation a few times as necessary. Most of cultural references just as US TV shows, celebrities, memes, are totally foreign to them.

Pronouncing hard names is cool:

Take the time to learn how to correctly pronounce different names. This effort will go a long way toward making the student feel welcomed, respected, and appreciated.

Group Facilitation Tips:

- Many common icebreakers are not common. Provide instructions as if no one played it before.
- International students tend to enjoy small-group activities, even in pairs for 1-on-1 conversations.
- If you’re grouping students according to their hometowns, think about how you’d facilitate with international students.

Who are the LINKers?

Read “My First Week at James Madison University” story here:
bit.ly/jmuLINKers-story