Characteristics of the U.S. classroom

The U.S. university system

The U.S. university system commonly consists of four years of study at a post-secondary institution. These years of study are at the “undergraduate” level and are commonly called freshman, sophomore, junior and senior years, though you might sometimes hear freshman referred to as “first years.”

In the U.S., university students may come from very different backgrounds and may take courses for very different reasons. In some countries, university students take courses only within their chosen major. In the U.S., however, universities value a liberal arts tradition that emphasizes study across many disciplines. Students therefore take courses in a variety of disciplines to fulfill general education requirements in addition to taking courses within their major. Because of their varied backgrounds and varied reasons for taking a course, differences among students can be pronounced, especially in introductory courses.

Typical high school preparation

Generally, at the high school level, students take a broad variety of classes without special emphasis in any particular subject. Students are required to take a certain minimum number of mandatory subjects, but may choose additional subjects (“electives”) to fill out their required hours of learning. Mandatory subjects typically include: science, math, English, and social sciences.

About 3.4 million students are expected to graduate from high school in 2012–13, including 3.1 million students from public high schools and 283,000 students from private high schools. Nearly 70% of these students are expected to attend U.S. colleges and universities. In fall 2012, a record 21.6 million students are expected to attend American colleges and universities. Many international TAs are surprised to learn that when high school students apply to college, they are expected to have a broad range of experience that includes jobs (both volunteer and paid), participation in clubs, athletics, service to the community and other extracurricular activities.

1 All portions of this document that are not specific to WFU are reprinted with permission from Vanderbilt University’s Center for Teaching, International Teaching Assistants Guide.
University costs & payment

The families of U.S. undergraduates pay large amounts of money for costs associated with college (tuition, supplies, room and board). The total costs for a Wake Forest student this year is:

## 2014-15 Cost of Attendance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Cost</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tuition and Fees</td>
<td>$46,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Room</td>
<td>$8,240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Board</td>
<td>$4,398</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books and Supplies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal expenses</td>
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<td>Transportation</td>
<td>$900</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fed Stafford Loan Average Fee</td>
<td>$62</td>
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<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>$62,600</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

General Characteristics of the U.S. Classroom

Students ask questions and share opinions

In general, the learning environment in the United States and at Wake Forest is highly interactive, and teacher-student relations and communications tend to be relatively informal. As a result, U.S. students ask more questions and give their opinions more freely than in many other higher-educational systems.

Teachers encourage students to have independent opinions and to make the course relevant to their own interests and goals. Students are often casual with teachers, especially those they like and respect. They also appreciate a chance to discuss viewpoints that do not necessarily agree with the teacher’s ideas.
The classroom environment tends to be informal
Although there are many differences in social, economic, and educational levels in the U.S., there is a theme of equality that runs through social relationships. The notion of equality leads students to be quite informal in their general behaviors and relationships with others.

Many international students and staff comment on the informal dress in the U.S., which is generally very casual. You will see students going to class in shorts and t-shirts. Instructors’ clothing may also be informal, though it is typically more formal than that of the students.

The informality of dress, posture, and speech, especially the common use of the first name, can be shocking to some international students and scholars. It is not uncommon for students to use slang in the classroom, or as part of their ordinary conversations with instructors or other students.

There is also a vernacular that is specific to Wake Forest that might be helpful to know.

- **Old Gold and Black**: student run campus newspaper, named for the school colors.
- **The Pit**: A popular restaurant in the Benson Student Center. A “pit sit” is when students hang out together at the Pit.
- **Mag Quad**: Also known as the lower quad, where all the Magnolia trees are growing.
- **Hearn Plaza**: The upper quad, where the Wait Chapel is located.
- **Work Forest**: The name students jokingly give Wake Forest because of the amount of work they have to do in their classes.
- **Pro Humanitate**: The Latin motto of Wake Forest University; literally it means “For Humanity”. It signals that Wake Forest values students who want to serve their community and the world to improve peoples’ lives.

Students expect instructors to appear friendly and open to interaction
Students in the U.S. respond well to “immediacy cues”, or verbal and nonverbal communication that reduces the psychological and physical distance between instructors and students (LeGros and Faez, 2012). U.S. students tend to respond well to instructors who make eye contact, smile and nod, or use other nonverbal means to indicate that they are listening carefully to the student (Teven and Hanson, 2004). Students also tend to respond well to positive verbal cues, such as inviting students to speak or verbally rewarding students’ contributions (Neulip, 1997). Students can perceive instructors who do not exhibit these cues as being unfriendly or uninterested in the class or the students – and can therefore be less willing to learn (Fitch and Morgan, 2003). In addition, feedback in the U.S. tends to be affirmative and non-authoritarian. Although it’s important to correct students’ misperceptions, instructors often do so by noting something positive before giving the corrective feedback.
TA identity in the classroom

Talking about your command of English
Early in the course, you should acknowledge that English is not your first language, and ask your students to let you know when you speak too quickly, quietly, or if students don’t understand something. Throughout the course, you might keep these tips in mind:

- When speaking, make eye contact with students in the class (which is not a norm in every culture). By doing so, you will be able to discern who looks confused and address questions as they arise.
- Face students while speaking. It can be difficult to remember to turn around – especially in the case of blackboard work – but you might get into the habit of writing the information on the board first, and then turning around and speaking.
- Use lots of demonstrations, props, and illustrations to supplement instruction.
- Write key words on blackboard/overhead/PowerPoint, particularly when your pronunciation of the word is unclear. Handouts prepared ahead of time can help students follow instruction.

Speaking with confidence
One of the most important things you can do to establish a good tone in your class is to speak with confidence. Some tips that may help:

- Remember that the students want you to do well. They have chosen to come to your class to learn and they want you to be successful.
- Remember to not to worry too much about any signs of nervousness or anxiety. Much of the nervousness you feel is not usually seen by others.
- Concentrate on your topic. Come to class prepared with an outline of the lecture. This should not be a written speech, but an outline that you can freely speak from rather than read from.
- Think positively instead of focusing on your fear. Positive thinking is a step in overcoming nervousness.
- Make strong eye contact with your students and use good body language to convey your confidence.

Asking & answering questions
Dealing with student questions is a recurring challenge for ITAs in the classroom, lab, and during office hours. Knowing certain phrases that are often used in structuring a question can help you identify students’ questions and to ask questions to students.

Asking questions
Here are some useful opening expressions that lead up to questions:

- *I wonder if you could tell me…. (I was wondering if you….*
- *I’d like to know…. 
Often, when you ask a question, you may not get enough information in reply, or not get the answer that you intended/expected. This result means you will have to ask for additional information or to ask your question in a different way (rephrase it) so that it is better understood. You could say:

- *Could you tell me more about....?*
- *Would you mind telling me more about....?*
- *I'd like to know more about....*
- *Something else I was wondering about was....*
- *Sorry, that's not really what I mean. What I'd like to know is....*

When you are asking a question, it is important to give students 7-10 seconds to answer. You may have to restate the question or offer other prompts or tips in order to direct them.

You should ask your students questions throughout your lesson. Don’t wait until the end of your lesson to learn if your students have understood the topic you’re teaching. Pause at the end of each main idea and ask them a few questions to see if they can apply what you’ve taught them. Ask them to provide an example, to work a sample problem or to supply some missing information.

**Answering questions**

There are a number of conventions that can be useful in answering questions. For example, you may need to delay answering a question while you think for a brief moment or look at your notes, etc. Here are some expressions for when you need to delay your response:

- *Well, let me see...*
- *Well now...*
- *Oh, let me think for a moment....*
- *That's a very interesting question.*

If you do not know the answer, you may want to say:

- *I'm not sure. I'll have to check...*
- *I'm not really sure.*
- *I can't answer that one right now.*
- *I'm sorry, I really don't know.*
- *Let me get back to you (on that one).*

Or, if you think the question is not directly on topic:

- *That's something I'd rather not talk about just now.*
- *I wonder if you'd hold that question for later?*
- *Let's go back to ______*
- *To get back to our initial question, ...*

Or if you do not understand the question:

- *I'm sorry, but would you mind repeating that?*
- *Excuse me, but I didn't quite follow that.*
- *Would you say that again in a different way?*
- *Are you asking me to explain ______?*
Additional resources for asking questions

- Asking Questions online listening module.

  This module will help you become better acquainted with a variety of typical student questions, common idioms used within them, and fast, reduced speech, a manner of speaking often used by American students. Most of the questions in these materials are generic questions; they could be heard in nearly any class or lab.

Office hours

Holding office hours is an important responsibility for many TAs, yet many international TAs are unfamiliar with this type of instructor-student interaction. Office hours are generally held weekly in 1 or 2 hour blocks of time when class does not meet. You should announce your office hours at the first class meeting, and repeat them throughout the semester. You can also request that students make an appointment to see you during office hours once or twice during the semester.

Greeting student when they arrive at your office

Make the student feels welcome by using eye contact, smiling, gesturing toward a chair, and appearing eager. As you get to know students, your openers can be adjusted to their personalities.

- Hello. Would you like to see me?
- Hi, _____ (name). Come in and have a seat.
- Hi, _____ (name). Have a seat. What can I do for you?

Engaging in chitchat and getting to the point

Briefly engage in chitchat to help the student feel welcome and comfortable. But generally, this type of exchange is brief and you may need to direct students to the point of their visit. Usually, it is best not to assume that you know why the student has come to see you unless an appointment was set up for a specific purpose.

- So, what are you here to talk about?
- Okay, let’s see what you’ve got.
- Do you want to talk about the homework?
- Let’s deal with that question first.
- There’s a lot to go over. Let’s get started, okay?
- You wanted to know about ___. Do you want me to talk about the basics?
- Would you like to try working through a problem? Would that help?

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Using pencil and paper
As you discuss a topic with the student, writing down unclear points can help to resolve communication problems. You can then give the paper to the student to take with him/her. You can also draw a diagram on paper can clarify a concept, or ask the student to do so to demonstrate his or her understanding.

Expressing disagreement/saying “no” politely
Sometimes students want to question a grade you have assigned. Or a disagreement might arise when a student cannot solve a problem and feels frustrated by the course material. Control these situations by acknowledging the student’s viewpoint while maintaining your position. Use polite phrases so that “no” doesn’t sound so strong. Present good reasons for your decision so the student will understand your point of view.

If the disagreement is serious, or the problem cannot be resolved, it may be best to terminate meeting. Reschedule for a later time when the student has had a chance to think about what the two of you have discussed. Remain calm, even if the student is angry or begins to cry. Politely bring the meeting to a close.

- I can see your point, but …
- Yes, but on the other hand …
- I really wouldn't put it that way, because …
- I’m not sure why you chose …
- I think you’ve missed one important fact, which is …
- I know this isn't what you want to hear, but …
- I’m sorry you don’t accept my decision, but I have to stand by it.
- Okay, let’s stop for now. If you still feel this way in a couple of days, we can talk again.

Bringing closure
Close the meeting by guiding the discussion to an end.

- Do you think we’ve covered everything?
- Why don’t you look it over and come back next week if you have questions?
- Let me know if you need any more help.
- I’m here twice a week, so you can come back on _____.
- Think about it for a day or so; then we’ll talk again.
- Okay, then. So I’ll see you in class.
- Maybe if you have any other questions about the test, you can come see me next week.
Resources

Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching, Graduate Student Support: http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/ta-resources/

Portland State University Center for Academic Excellence: Resources for International TAs: http://stage.pdx.edu/cae/resources-for-international-teaching-assistants-itas


Phonetics: The Sounds of Spoken Language: http://www.uiowa.edu/~acadtech/phonetics/

Idiom Connection: http://idiomconnection.com/

Avoiding Plagiarism: https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/589/01/

University of California, Santa Barbara: Language and Communication Skills for the Classroom: http://oic.id.ucsb.edu/international-ta-handbook/language-communication-skills-classroom

Harvard University Derek Bok Center:

Managing Hot Moments in the Classroom: http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/html/icb.topic58474/hotmoments.html

Some Different Types of Questioning:
http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/html/icb.topic58474/questioning.html

Techniques for responding:
http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/html/icb.topic58474/responding.html