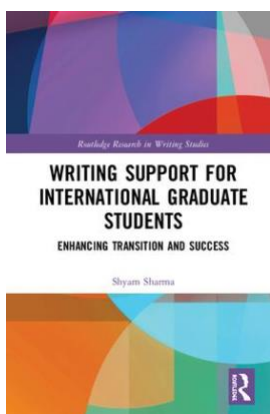


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Writing Support for International Graduate Students: Enhancing Transition and Success

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Writing Support for International Graduate Students: Enhancing Transition and Success by Shyam Sharma is a valuable addition to the Routledge Research in Writing Studies series. In actuality, this volume's audience is far wider than its title suggests. It includes thoughtful, holistic discussions of the needs of international graduate students to inform practitioners at every institutional level. Researchers in many fields, including composition, second language acquisition, educational policy, and student affairs, will also benefit from the book's thorough literature review. Sharma's primary argument is that strong leadership is essential to address the challenges faced by international graduate students. Rather than basing decisions solely on finances or public sentiment,

institutional leaders should be compassionate advocates with an understanding of institutional, social, national, and global realities that their international students face.

Not all international students are second-language learners, nor are all second-language learners from another country. Sharma focuses on those who face unique challenges as *international* students learning to live, work, and study in an unfamiliar culture. Tasks that those who are familiar with U.S. culture take for granted—everything from presenting at a conference to casual interactions with colleagues to signing a lease on an apartment—can be quite daunting. In fact, the author lays out myriad ways in which the new cultural environment has far more effect on international graduate students' scholarship than the language-based issues that many deficiency-oriented support measures address. For example, rather than forcing

international teaching assistants into accent-reduction classes or ignoring the content of their dissertations to highlight every grammatical misstep, institutions need to implement support to help graduate students communicate effectively in multiple contexts. Without confidence and explicit knowledge of how to negotiate the labyrinths of academia, the job market, and even daily life, international students cannot develop the proficiency of communication expected of graduate students and on which good writing is predicated. What Sharma proposes is a massive cultural shift in higher education; however, he presents ways in which to turn a daunting challenge into a reality.

In his preface, Sharma describes his own unexpectedly difficult journey as a new international graduate student. Years later, as a faculty member, he saw his students struggle with similar issues of academic transition, and these experiences became key motivators for the research project behind the present book. Chapter 1, “Introduction,” is an overview of Sharma’s qualitative study, including the design, methods of data collection and coding, scholarly context, and relevant frameworks. The study was conducted from 2014 to 2017 involving an impressive 168 interviews of 191 individuals (faculty, staff, and students) from 35 universities. The study’s scope adds to the validity and persuasiveness of the recommendations found throughout subsequent chapters. However, while researchers are likely to focus heavily on this inspirational chapter, a single read-through will suffice for most practitioners. In a rhetorically impactful move, the author starts the chapter with the juxtaposition of two quotes—one from 1851 by Yung Wing, the first Chinese student to graduate from a U.S. college, and one from 2016 by an instructor whose program teaches a significant number of students from China. The remarks are identical in theme and illustrate that the contextual challenges faced by international students in American higher education are nothing new—adding to the urgency with which institutions should address these challenges.

Chapter 2, “Understanding Politics,” explores a key theme that emerged from Sharma’s qualitative data—the powerlessness (actual and/or perceived) that can hinder international students’ psychological well-being and academic progress. Dynamics from the micro level (e.g., microaggressions) to the macro level (e.g., immigration laws and political climate) can all greatly affect international students’ agency and ability to navigate both daily life and academia. For this book, implications at the programmatic and institutional level are most salient. Administrators must develop understanding of the dynamics that are particular to international students so that they can create a welcoming and supportive environment. Writing is central to the role of graduate students, but, if marginalized based on international identity, they will not be able to take full advantage of on-campus resources or opportunities, such as peer collaboration, to develop as writers. Many institutions exhibit a disconnect between *discourse* about international students and their *actual* situation. Sharma encourages leaders to ask tough, introspective questions: Are international students publicly glorified but privately denigrated and/or being used solely to cross-subsidize other areas of the institution? If so, advocates who more thoroughly grasp the nuances need to step up.

In Chapter 3, “Shifting Focus,” Sharma promotes a contextualized approach to supporting international graduate-level writers. Institutions admit students because

they already do many, not *all*, things well; international students are no exception. Not only are they new to graduate school but also to an entire culture. Even if these students have been speaking English since birth, they likely do not already “write well” according to the norms and style used in American academia. Competence in language is not the sole end goal of their education; it is only one component of international students’ successful journey to graduate-level writing. Sharma’s insightful five-dimensional model is a useful framework for instructors and administrators, as it encapsulates virtually all of the ways in which this student population needs support: competence in language, composition/rhetorical skills, content knowledge, context awareness, and confidence.

Recommendations, both in terms of overall approach and specific application, are scattered throughout the text. Therefore, the book is not best utilized as a desk reference; rather, readers should devote attention to it in its entirety. In fact, the author explains how quick lists of best practices undermine the complexity of the issues at hand. The text would serve well to inform individuals teaching in or leading programs or as assigned reading for a task force on graduate and/or international students. For readers still seeking an abbreviated text, Chapter 4, “Fostering Agency through Effective Support Practices,” would be an appropriate source of some concrete applications. Characteristics of the most effective programs are highlighted, including types of support staff, co-requisite modules, community engagement programs, and professional development opportunities.

Chapter 5, “Advancing Advocacy through Programs and Leadership,” is a call to action for readers to advocate for international students at their own institutions. Cross-campus collaboration is essential to address the multifaceted needs of this student population, so support from the classroom, housing, student affairs, and childcare center, for example, all contribute to the academic progress of graduate-level scholars. Sharma’s timely critiques on political climate remind scholars of the duty to stay grounded in research and mission rather than speculation or stereotypes.

I find the volume to be an excellent resource for both seasoned professionals and early-career faculty and researchers who interact with international graduate students. The author weaves together empirical findings with engaging quotations from study participants, all the while utilizing a bibliographic essay style that points readers to sources of further reading for specific problems of practice. Those involved with programs exclusively at the undergraduate level will find this volume less applicable due to the unique needs of graduate students. Likewise, readers without experience consuming research may find the book to be too dense. Nonetheless, it is a much-needed contribution to international graduate student writing—a field that, after centuries in the making, should no longer be emerging.

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