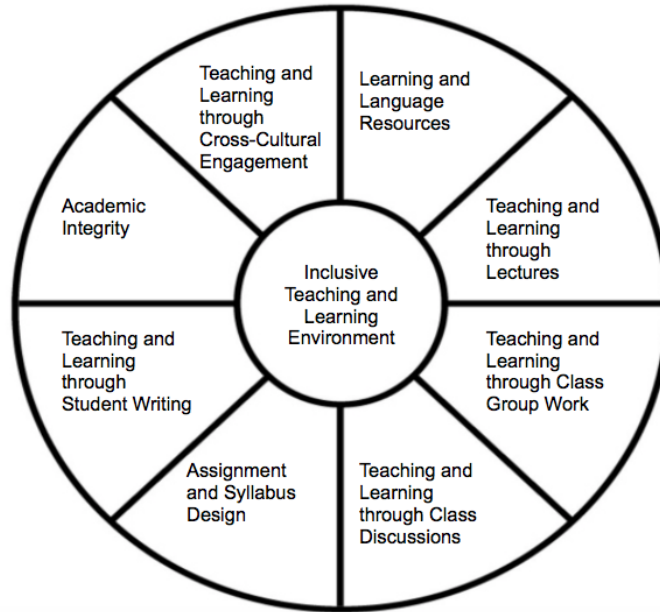**Helping Multilingual/International (ML/Int'l) Students Succeed: Frequently Asked Questions**

Inclusive Teaching and Learning Environment

1. **How can I proactively foster a more inclusive teaching and learning environment for my ML/Int'l students?**

   At its heart, inclusive teaching practices create a space where all students, including those from varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds, can learn and succeed to the best of their abilities. A key aspect is creating a space where students feel safe and valued for what they bring to the classroom. For a general overview of inclusive classrooms, look at the Stearns Center teaching guide on the topic here.

   Specifically for ML/Int'l students, it is important to build rapport with students at the beginning of the semester. Ask students to say their names for you, and do your best to pronounce them correctly, even if it takes multiple tries; don't expect students to choose a name you can easily pronounce. When choosing content and materials for your course, be sure to include international perspectives and global scholarship on the topic. Carefully consider what culture-specific knowledge is required to understand and fully engage with class materials and activities. When creating assignments, welcome an international perspective—if students need to write about air pollution control in an

environmental engineering class, allow them to write about the specific challenges and solutions in any country they choose, not just the US. Make students feel like their knowledge and background are valuable assets, rather than deficits to be overcome.

Teaching and Learning through Cross-Cultural Engagement

2.   **What are some cultural challenges that ML/Int'l students face, which may interfere with their success in my classroom?**

Cross-cultural misunderstandings are often more difficult to identify than linguistic ones because they are frequently unspoken. Students may feel uncomfortable explaining these issues to faculty members, making them largely invisible but no less important. For example, in the US professors expect students to take advantage of TAs and office hours if they are struggling to understand any course content. However, in other cultures students often expect to seek help from classmates or figure it out on their own; asking for help from a professor is seen as a last resort for desperate students who need extra hand-holding. This stigma may keep them away from your office hours, no matter how much you encourage students to use them. Similar cultural misunderstandings can arise around grading, academic integrity, class participation, and any number of issues faculty might not know to look for if they are only accustomed US classroom culture. More in-depth information and advice about cultural variations in the classroom can be found in [this report](#) by Carnegie Mellon University.

3. **How can I help students overcome some of the common cross-cultural challenges that they experience?**

Show an interest in your international students—find out where they're from and what their home countries are like. You can also educate yourself on some common cultural misunderstandings that frequently happen in US classrooms and be on the lookout for these issues. An excellent source of information on the topic is [here.](#) Generally, you can help avoid cross-cultural misunderstandings if you make your instructions much more explicit than you think you need to: don't assume students know what you want, show models of the work you expect, and give opportunities for

feedback before a final grade. Doing these things will not only benefit your international students—your domestic students will benefit from these habits as well.

Learning and Language Resources

4. **How can I better assess ML/Int'l students' understanding of readings and class materials?**

    Several factors other than language competency can interfere with a student's ability to understand and critically synthesize assigned readings. Students from different learning and rhetorical backgrounds may have difficulty understanding when it is appropriate to skim a large volume of reading, or how to find the most important ideas in an academic text. Consider giving students a set of comprehension questions for the first few assigned readings—this can help students focus on the ideas you find most important and help them read more efficiently. Before assigning a reading, tell them what they will be expected to do with the knowledge—summarize, write an essay, take a quiz, etc. This will help all students use appropriate readings strategies that prepare them to use the material effectively at a later date. Research also shows that giving students time to discuss difficult concepts from the reading in small groups can increase comprehension and critical thinking for both domestic and international students—let them identify the parts they struggled with and work to help each other. When students are expected to use the class readings as part of a larger graded assignment, try to break the assignment up into smaller parts that must be turned in regularly. This will help you identify early on any students who need extra help with comprehending the class materials. Early intervention can often make a big difference in student success.

5. **What language resources exist on campus that I can refer struggling students to?**

    Two useful campus resources are the Writing Center or the Learning Resource Center. [The Writing Center](#) offers one-on-one help both in-person and online, gives writing workshops, and provides written feedback on drafts. Their tutors are trained to

help Multilingual/International students, and they offer thesis and dissertation consultations specifically for graduate students.

The Learning Resource Center offers tutoring and workshops in English reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. Students can make appointments online or teachers can refer students for tutoring based on their specific needs. For a more comprehensive list of campus-wide resources available to Multilingual/International students, click here.

Teaching and Learning Through Lectures

6. **How can I better explain my course content for ML/Int'l students?**

    It is helpful to remember that the actions you take to make your lectures more comprehensible to ML/Int'l students will also make your lectures easier to understand for the native English speakers in your class. Research shows that simple actions like using clear discourse markers (verbally signaling which ideas are important, transitions between major topics, etc.) have a measurable impact on students' comprehension levels. Help students understand the structure of your lecture and the most important ideas by using visual aids like PowerPoint or Prezi. Make those slides available to your students before and after your lectures, via email or your Blackboard page. Provide pre-readings so your students have time to learn about the topic before a lecture. If you feel comfortable, allow students to make audio recordings during class. For further advice on lecturing to accommodate both international and domestic students, read this guide.

7. **How can I better assess ML/Int'l students' understanding of lectures and class discussions?**

    It helps to keep in mind that in some cultures, students are expected to keep quiet in class; asking questions might be seen as disrespectful or embarrassing to the professor. It is best not to assume, simply because a student does not ask questions, that she has fully understood everything. Likewise, it is best not to assume, simply because a student does not volunteer answers in class, that she has not understood anything. To assess whether or not a student has understood you, it is best to ask

specific comprehension questions (E.g. What is your homework for Monday? What is the airspeed velocity of an unladen swallow?) and avoid simply asking "Do you understand?"

To get a more complete picture of all your students' understanding, you can use a free classroom app like Socrative—software like this requires all students to answer your questions using their phone or computer, giving you real-time data about which specific students are struggling to understand content and which topics your class generally does/doesn't understand. As an added bonus for international students, it allows them to answer questions without the anxiety of speaking and making English mistakes in front of the whole class.

Teaching and Learning Through Class Group Work

8. **How can I foster better collaboration between ML/Int'l students and domestic students in class?**

   Though students may at first seem reluctant to work together with classmates from a different cultural or national background, the benefits are important. Both domestic and international students with higher rates of intercultural collaboration show higher abilities in critical thinking, leadership, empathy, and a host of other skills. Of course, these benefits don't come about automatically—group work should be strategically structured. It is important to create a classroom environment where students feel safe to express their opinions and make mistakes. To do this, dedicate time at the beginning of a semester to get-to-know-you activities that force every student in the class to speak to each other. Create mixed groups of international and domestic students and design activities where each student is a responsible "expert" on a topic, distributing the responsibility to contribute to group work evenly among all students. Consider keeping students in the same groups for an extended period of time so that they have the opportunity to build a rapport. Be explicit about your expectations and provide examples of successful group work so that all students know what is expected of them. Do not simply assume that students will work this out on their own.

Teaching and Learning through Class Discussions

9. **How can I encourage ML/Int'l students to participate more during class?**

Students who come from primarily lecture-based classroom cultures may not immediately understand the value of participating in class discussions, so it can be helpful to explain why you think discussions are important and what you expect students to gain from the experience. Even when international students are eager to participate, they often express frustration that conversations move too quickly or the language is too informal for them to understand and contribute in a meaningful way. They may also have anxieties about being misunderstood because of grammatical or pronunciation errors. If you're not sure what a student has said, try paraphrasing back to them what you've understood, and give them a chance to correct you or elaborate. Use phrases like "what I've heard from you is…" and be sure to do this with domestic students as well, so that multilingual students don't feel singled out.

Some of the anxieties students feel about speaking in front of the class can also be mitigated by giving students time to think and formulate responses to discussion questions before a whole-class discussion takes place. Consider giving students the discussion questions before class so they have time to prepare thoughts, or use a think-pair-share format where students have time to think about the questions individually, discuss their ideas with one other person, and then share their ideas with a larger group after they feel more confident. In small group discussions, use structured formats where all students are responsible for speaking or are responsible for certain ideas as "content experts." [Click here](#) for a list of such structured small group discussion activities, compiled by the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Assignment and Syllabus Design

10. **How can I better communicate course policies and assignment requirements?**

The actions you can take to make your assignment and course requirements clearer won't only help the international students in your classes—it will help all of your

students succeed and turn in better work. First, be sure to post your course policies in multiple places—in your syllabus, on Blackboard, on assignment prompts, etc.—and verbally remind students in class as well. Check students' comprehension of policies with specific questions—do not simply ask "do you understand?" or "does that make sense?"

When explaining assignment requirements, it is useful to remember that academic conventions and rhetorical styles can be culturally specific, so students may not be aware of unspoken assumptions or rules about academic work. Be more explicit in your instructions than you think you need to be. Give students examples of assignments and discuss in class what makes them strong or weak. Point out specific aspects or criteria that you will be looking for in their assignments as well. If possible, design assignments that require students to turn in parts and show their progress before the final assignment is due. This will allow you to identify students who have severely misunderstood anything or who need some extra help before receiving a final grade. Finally, distribute and discuss the grading rubric that you will use to evaluate their work before an assignment is due—this will clarify for students how exactly they will be graded and what you expect from them. The Stearns Center teaching guide on grading and rubrics is [here].

Teaching and Learning through Student Writing

11. How can I provide more useful feedback on ML/Int'l students' writing?

osbWhen asking students to revise their content, try to explain why they need to make changes and what they should do (without doing it for them)—for example, explaining why a student's conclusion is not supported by their evidence and how they can improve the logic of their argument is much more helpful than simply asking them to rewrite their conclusion.

There are, of course, times when you simply cannot ignore grammatical errors, especially when those errors make it difficult to understand the student's meaning. Pick and choose which grammatical errors to comment on; it is inefficient and even

counterproductive to correct every grammar error in a student's paper. Try to choose a couple errors to focus on, preferably grammatical errors that the student makes frequently and if corrected, will improve the student's clarity and communication of ideas. Explain the error and how to fix it in a few places at the beginning of the paper, then simply circle or highlight the same error throughout the paper. Give students the chance to revise and correct their errors in a later draft. If you are giving feedback on a final draft, marking grammatical errors is not an efficient use of your time because students will not have the opportunity to learn from your feedback and improve. For more detailed instruction about giving feedback to multilingual writers, the Purdue OWL has published this excellent guide, including a feedback flowchart to help you decide which errors to comment on, and how.

12. **How can I better assess ML/Int'l students' writing?**

When assessing International students' writing, it is helpful to have realistic expectations about what a student is capable of achieving in the course of a semester. One University of California study found that, even in the best of circumstances, it takes Limited English Proficient students 4-7 years to develop academic English proficiency. This does not mean that you should feel like you have to lower your standards of what constitutes acceptable work. Nonetheless, when a teacher focuses intensely on linguistic accuracy, they often accidentally pay less attention to the quality of ideas and critical thinking that a student has shown. Using an analytic rubric—one that breaks down and grades different aspects of the writing assignment rather than grading holistically—can help teachers to focus on grading both content and language, and gives a teacher the opportunity to weight each aspect of the paper according to their priorities and preferences. An analytic rubric also helps students understand more clearly where their strengths and weaknesses lie, and it helps to contextualize your feedback. Such an approach can help you give students fairer grades based on both their ideas and on their ability to effectively communicate those ideas. For more information on building rubrics, the Stearns Center has this useful teaching guide on grading.

Academic Integrity

13. How can I help ML/Int'l students avoid problems with accidental plagiarism?

Several recent studies on student perceptions of plagiarism have revealed that both domestic and international students alike often don't have a clear understanding of what plagiarism is and don't remember ever being taught about it, despite having received instruction in the past. Students also frequently report confusion and frustration at inconsistent definitions of plagiarism used by different professors across different disciplines.

Given these confusions, it is important to clearly define for all your students what exactly you consider plagiarism and what your policy is when you find plagiarized work. When it comes to student collaboration, clearly define what work students are allowed to do together and what you expect them to do separately; this line is not always obvious. Also, take the time to discuss with students why plagiarism is a problem. If you do not want to spend a great deal of time in class teaching about plagiarism, give students practice in identifying plagiarism for homework, such as this online plagiarism game from Lycoming College.

To help students avoid plagiarism, structure assignments into multiple drafts, where students have the chance to receive feedback and rewrite any troublesome parts of their papers. Encourage students to use plagiarism detection software as a learning tool to help them identify instances of accidental plagiarism—Academic Help or Quetext both have free programs that students can use before turning in a paper. Also consider allowing students to see their SafeAssign reports on Blackboard after submitting an assignment. If you do find plagiarism in a student paper, try using the first offense as a teachable moment instead of a case for disciplinary action. Show the student which part of the paper is plagiarized, why it is considered plagiarism, and give him a chance to rewrite the assignment. If the offense was accidental, this will help the student avoid plagiarism mistakes in the future and will provide a valuable learning experience.