

How to be a Top Student in the USA.
By Ross Jennings



“TEN COMMANDMENTS”

FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS



By last count, there are over 600,000 international students studying in the US. For the most part, they perform well and are a great credit and benefit

to the American colleges and universities which host them. At the same time, most international students in the US study in a language and academic system foreign to them. These challenges must be recognized and overcome for international students to be truly top students in the US. Here is how:

LET YOUR PASSION, NOT GETTING A “GOOD JOB”, DETERMINE YOUR MAJOR AND YOUR LIFE

Bill Gates dropped out of Harvard in his first year to play with crude computers in his garage with his friends. Harvard did not approve, but Bill went on to found Microsoft, and at last count was worth about \$30 billion or so. I guess he did ok without Harvard. Many students waste years studying a subject they think will get them a good job, but they don't really like their major. Why spend time and money to prepare for a job you are going to hate? Confucius was right when he said, “Do what you love, and you'll never have to work a day in your life”. Let your passion guide your major, and your life, and good things are much more likely to happen.

IF YOU WANT HARVARD, BECOME A HARVARD STUDENT

Many international students look for a “formula” – a system – to get into an elite university like Harvard, Yale or Stanford. There is no such thing. Getting into elite universities requires native-level English, a top gpa, excellent test scores, a compelling resume, and luck. If there is any formula at all, here it is: Students who identify and pursue a passion have a much better chance of getting into an elite university

than those just obsessed with numbers (test scores and gpa). Top universities are looking for top students with a commitment to something compelling. What do you really, really care about? Have you done anything significant with your life other than study? If the answer is no, you aren't a Harvard student.

LIVE IN ENGLISH

If English is not your first language, you have an obvious disadvantage compared to native American students in college. The better your English, the better your academic performance in college and the better your job opportunities

DO YOUR OWN WORK

In this day of the internet, it is increasingly tempting for both American and international students to hand in the work of others as their own. This is wrong, for three reasons. One, it is cheating, something teachers hate. You can (and should) lose grade points for it. Two, it prevents you from developing the skills needed to do great work on your own. Three, it becomes a habit as work becomes increasingly difficult at higher levels, and you did not develop the skills at the lower levels to cope on your own. Doing your own work means short term pain for long term gain. Cheating means the opposite.

“...ENGLISH MUST BE LIVED IN, THROUGH FRIENDSHIPS, JOBS, VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES, CHOICE OF ROOMMATES, READING, WRITING AND ENTERTAINMENT. IF YOU DON'T LIVE AT LEAST HALF OF YOUR WAKING HOURS IN ENGLISH, YOUR ENGLISH WILL ALWAYS BE WEAK...”

after graduation. You will never learn good English just from classes. English must be lived in, through friendships, jobs, volunteer opportunities, choice of roommates, reading, writing and entertainment. If you don't live at least half of your waking hours in English, your English will always be weak.

STUDY TO LEARN

Many international students approach classes as primarily an exercise to get good grades. Grades are important, but learning is even more so. Some students pester teachers to give them high grades because they “need them”. That is exactly the wrong approach. Ask for help to learn the subjects better. From good learning will come both the knowledge that will eventually be helpful in your job, and good grades as well.

GET INVOLVED IN CLASS

Most American teachers expect their students to participate in class. That means they want them to get involved – ask questions, express opinions, definitely not sit in the back of class and say nothing. This is a big challenge in a second language, and for students who are used to being quiet in class. When in Rome, however, do as the Romans do. At first, it will be hard. It gets easier, however, and it is really necessary to be a successful student in the US.

DEVELOP OUTSIDE INTERESTS

A Harvard study indicated that students who work or volunteer up to 20 hours per week have a much happier college experience than those who don't, and they do not suffer any decrease in grade point average. The message is clear – develop outside »

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interests and devote regular time for them. American colleges and universities have countless opportunities to learn new skills, pursue new interests, and get involved. Learn karate or kick boxing, join a club, volunteer in the community, get a part time job, join student government. You need to find these activities on your own, however – they won't come looking for you. Get busy!


CONNECT WITH LOCAL SOCIETY

Many international students live and socialize only with people from their own country or language group. Many American students do the same thing abroad. This is a big mistake! Spend some time with your own language people, but also mix with Americans and people from other countries. Classroom time doesn't count. To really experience a country, you need to get to know its people by having personal relationships with them. Then you will not only learn, but you'll feel truly at home in your new country.

NEVER BE SATISFIED

Most second language learners get to a point where they can get by, academically and socially – and then stop learning. They hit a plateau – a comfortable place – and don't feel the need to get better. Don't let this happen to you. Keep pushing yourself to improve your English, in speaking, writing and reading. If you're not going forward, you're going backward.

DEVELOP YOUR NETWORK

In many countries, students take the same classes with the same classmates for four years. These classmates become each other's lifetime support group, their network. In the US, every student takes different classes with different classmates, so there isn't the same natural classmate network. You have to create it yourself. Make friends with students from all countries, teachers, counselors, employers, and anyone you associate with closely. Get to know at least one teacher well each year. Keep in good touch with these friends and associates – they will be your support group in the future (and you theirs someday). 

Ross Jennings is the Vice President of International Programs at Green River Community College in Auburn, WA, USA. He earned a bachelor's degree from UC Santa Barbara and master's degrees from the University of Washington, Oklahoma and Stanford. He followed this advice as an international student himself in Beirut, Lebanon, and had such a great experience that it inspired him to live in the Middle East for another twelve years. Ross can be reached at rjennings@greenriver.edu.