By Margaret Zhang (China) and Green River Community College staff (USA)

Sending a child abroad to study is a huge family investment. Unless scholarships are available, it will cost the family between $150,000 and $400,000, depending on the schools and programs. Study abroad is a huge business, as well. In 2011, 3.5 million students were studying outside their home countries. About 700,000 of them were studying in the United States, of whom almost 160,000 were from China. International students contributed $20 billion to the United States and many billions more to the other countries hosting such students.

Despite the cost, more and more parents have sent or are planning to send their children to study abroad. Parents naturally want to make sure their children will be safe, successful, and get a good job after they graduate. How can parents best help their children achieve these goals?

1. Organize study abroad as a family project

The parents and students must work together to maximize their children’s chances of success. Think of study abroad as a family project. Projects require planning, resources, execution and evaluation.

It is necessary to work out a thoughtful plan before the project kick-off, including assessing your child’s strength and development areas before his/her departure, preferably one or two years in advance. You need to think carefully about what your child needs to prepare beforehand, such as

- **English** – general proficiency, active and useful knowledge (not just passive study-for-the-test knowledge), TOEFL or IELTS result, if the school requires it
- **Personal skills** – independent-learning, self-discipline, time management, planning and execution competencies for both life and studies
- **Study abroad information** – knowledge about the targeted country’s educational system, social life, culture and local information about the countries and schools being considered

After giving all these considerations to the above, the parents should go to the
stage of project planning, risk analysis and its control, estimated challenges and the ways to cope with, project budgeting, communication channel with the child and the process monitoring. Otherwise, the project might be beyond control and lots of unexpected things could happen. Some of the children will be like a broken-line kite and enjoys the absolute freedom abroad. Therefore, parents need to be an effective project manager, clarify the roles and responsibilities, expectations, frequency of regular communication with each other, rules and principles to be followed.

We often hear parents’ complaints about their children on the honesty and reliability about their child’s feedback on their academic performance and scores. Sometimes the children hide the truth from them, or at least share the good news and hold back the bad.

What can parents do?

- **Make a family plan with your child.** Keep it simple, and stick to it. A sample plan is at the end of this article.
- **Get your child’s grades yourself at the end of each term.** Almost all colleges and universities issue grades by website. Each student gains access by user ID and password. Get the website address, user ID and password from your child; then you can look up your student’s grades directly.
- **Reward performance.** Even if you have the money, don’t get your child anything big, like a car or vacation trip, unless he or she meets performance targets. No 3.3 grade point average, no car. Even small rewards will be appreciated – money for a nice dinner, sending your child’s favorite snack from home, or just a hand-written card – these thoughtful gestures will encourage continued excellence.

2. **Build up trust and provide support and sympathy to your child**

In carrying out his or her part of the above mentioned Family Plan, the child faces lots of challenges and pressures. Asian parents have very high expectations for their children’s academic success. They hope to see positive outcomes soon after their children arrive in U.S.

However, the transition to a new culture, language and educational system is far from easy for most
international students. First, there is culture shock, which affects almost every newcomer to a foreign country. Children often become homesick as they adjust to a very different society, have to make new friends, learn the language, and figure out how to get even the simplest things done. Second, there are huge differences in the learning styles, grading and study approaches of Asian and American students and teachers. None of this is easy.

This is a time for parents to be understanding, and not expect too much at first. Put yourself in your child’s shoes. How would you feel if you had to deal with all of these difficulties and changes, and do so in English? Your child needs to take time to adjust himself/herself in the new living and studying environment. At the same time, all parents should expect their children to work hard, go to class every day, and get help from school advisors and counselors when they need it.

Most people living abroad experience culture shock at first, so expect your child will also. Culture shock has three phases: 1) initial excitement in the new environment (good), 2) depression from difficulties in adjusting to a new country (bad), and 3) long-term happiness in mastering life abroad (good). It is important for parents not to overreact in phase 2 of culture shock, but to understand what their children are going through. The best “cure” for phase 2 of culture shock is for students to be active socially, academically and physically (meaning getting exercise), and not withdraw into their rooms or skip classes. Parents should recommend these cures when their children are suffering from culture shock.

3. Respect the importance of English

Parents and students must also be realistic about their goals and about the academic process. There are no short cuts in education. This applies to English as well. Some students and parents think taking pre-college English is a waste of time, or something that can be rushed through with a little extra effort. In fact, good English skills are essential to academic success in the U.S, and to job success if the child works in an environment in which English is important.

To master English, students need not only to study hard, but if in the U.S, to live in English as well. If their roommates and all of their friends are from the same country, and they don’t do things outside of class with Americans and other country people, their English will develop much more slowly and imperfectly than students who spend more of their time outside of class with English speaking friends and co-workers.

Maggie Zhang in Shanghai once advised a student who went to study at Green River Community College (GRCC). He tried to pass IELTS before leaving China and hoped that he could skip pre-college English (called Intensive ESL at GRCC). However, he
didn't get a high enough score on IELTS to skip IESL and placed in a middle level of the program. His mom and dad were not happy he had to study English, and pressured him to retake IELTS to skip English. He had so much pressure on him that he not only failed IELTS again, but failed in his Intensive ESL classes. He was very unhappy, avoided communicating with his parents, and thought about starting over at another college.

Fortunately, Maggie was able to convince his mother to be more realistic about his English ability, and about the amount of time it would take him to build his skills to the level necessary to be successful in academic classes. The student was in fact a fine young man, with dreams of becoming a sportscaster or journalist. Just recently, Maggie heard from the mother that everything was resolved. Rather than hide from his parents, they recently had a Skype conversation in which they saw his smiling face, and he is now making good progress in his classes. They restored the trust and respect that all parents want with their children.

Parents, show your love and have faith in the child’s success. Have high standards, but give encouragement and sympathy when your child encounters difficulties. Kids need comfort and care instead of blame or disappointment, just as adults do when they are in low spirits. Let your child believe that you have no doubt about his or her capabilities, because you have clearly assessed his or her strengths and weaknesses before sending him or her to study abroad.

4. Be realistic in your goals for your child

Asian parents are normally very dominant and forceful in family life. They are always the final decision makers and controllers for everything. They often have very high expectations for their children’s academic success and hope they can get into the best universities (Harvard in the U.S, Peking and Qinghua in China, Tokyo in Japan, Seoul in Korea, etc.). Before setting such lofty expectations, it is good for parents to ask themselves if they could have gotten in to such high universities themselves when they were young. If the answer is no, lighten up. Aim high, but realistically match your child’s goals to his or her abilities and ambitions. Amy Chua, the famous Chinese-American “tiger mother”, very strongly trained and pushed her daughters to get into Harvard or Yale, but she was a Yale professor herself (her daughter got into Harvard, and her father taught at UC Berkeley). If you aren’t a Harvard or Beida graduate, encourage your kids to do their best, but don’t kill them if
they don’t make it to Harvard. There are a lot of other good schools.

5. Don’t neglect your child’s personal development

All parents want the best for their kids. Many hope that they can be top students and get into a prestigious university in the U.S. To accomplish this, they invest a lot in prep classes or tutoring for TOEFL, SAT or IELTS tests. They strongly believe that if their kids get very high test scores, they will gain admission to top universities in U.S., and automatically be successful in life.

In the parents’ minds, high scores are equivalent to success.

There is indeed a correlation between academic achievement and success in life. The connection, however, is far from complete. There are other factors which in fact are even more decisive.

Maggie Zhang’s core business is corporate training and recruitment for high level managers in China. She has worked with a number of internationally known Chinese and foreign companies, and is an expert in identifying what top companies want in their executive hires. These companies are looking for candidates with both excellent functional (hard skills) and behavioral competencies (soft skills). And in most cases, soft skills are the key for personal success. Behavioral competencies refer to a person’s attitude, values, habits and behaviors.

Maggie’s criteria for assessing talented people include, but not limited to, the following traits: creative-thinking, positive attitude, integrity, commitment, honesty, effective communication and interpersonal skills, problem-solving, decision-making, persuasiveness, leadership/influencing skills, entrepreneurship, respect for people, transparency, passion, enthusiasm, attention to details, down to earth, self-starter, self-motivator, self-discipline, vision, sensitivity, responsibility, initiative, stress tolerance, change management, responsiveness, tenacity, flexibility, adaptability, self-assessment, self-confidence, self-management, budget control (management of personal wealth/money), time management and conflict management.

Most of these qualities are best developed starting in the teenage years. These competencies can ensure the child’s personal successful development both in life and studies. If is hard in practice for many parents to encourage this kind of personal growth, however. It is more natural in Asian cultures for parents to tell the
kids what to do, and expect them to do it. This teaches obedience, but not the important life success skills listed above.

6. Try to learn more about the international program and western culture

Many parents find that it gets harder and harder to communicate with their kids after years of overseas studies. They feel the distance between hearts is getting far. How come? In fact, the child is studying not only for the degree or certificate. He or she will be also greatly influenced by the way of thinking, culture, values and even behaviors by American culture and people. If the parents have limited knowledge about western culture, they might find it increasingly difficult to share in the experiences and development of their kids studying abroad. In addition, students living abroad become more mature and independent as they adjust to a new culture. This maturity and independence, as well as being a part of two cultures, will precipitate the need for parents and their children to change their relationship.

It is good for parents to learn as much about the culture, history, food and customs of their children’s country of study as possible, as well as finding out as much as they can about their children’s school. In addition to being good about the relationship, it is fun and useful for the parents to learn new things and become global citizens themselves. Their kids will really appreciate the effort, and it will benefit the parents too.

7. Communicate with your child

The success of your children is highly dependent on your relationship with them. All children need the support and encouragement of their parents to do well in life. When children feel love and validation from their parents, they will feel confident and perform better in life. Parents need to communicate with their children on a regular basis and make themselves available. Parents should also give their kids the opportunity to speak their minds (politely of course!) and try not to judge them. The role of the parent is to support their children and provide any guidance that they might need during their international experience. Parents who make themselves available will allow their children to know they have someone to fall back on and they have the confidence to make critical decisions for their own lives.
FAMILY PLAN

Behind every successful student abroad is his or her family. All of us in our family will do our part to ensure that the student in our family will be successful in his or her objectives abroad.

We the parents promise to contribute in these ways:
- **Goals** – We will help our child decide on his or her major and objectives, respecting his or her input in such matters.
- **Money** – We will support our child financially, within reasonable spending limits.
- **Support** – We will be supportive and understanding of the inevitable ups and downs all international students endure.
- **Freedom** – We will give our child enough freedom to grow, mature, and make his or her own mistakes, while recognizing that he or she must be accountable to us.

I the student promise to contribute in these ways:
- **Work** – I will work hard to achieve my objectives, and attend class every day.
- **Communication** – I will call, text or email my parents on an agreed schedule (once a week, for example). I will also tell my parents the truth.
- **Limits** – I will have experiences and fun, but never at the expense of my objectives.
- **Money** – I will take good care of the money my parents give me, and not spend foolishly.

Contact information

Father’s telephone and email:
Mother’s telephone and email:
Student’s telephone and email:
Student’s best friend’s name, telephone and email:

**Grades** – Most colleges and universities post students’ grades on their websites. Students must use their user ID numbers and passwords to access their grades. Parents can access their children’ grades, too, if their children give them access.

Website address for grades: [https://www.greenriver.edu/Register/waci002.html](https://www.greenriver.edu/Register/waci002.html)
Student’s user ID:
Student’s password:

We all agree to follow this Family Plan (signatures of parents and child below).