Prioritizing Exam Integrity among International Students

Anxiety about testing is common for international students due to time pressures, heightened fear of failure, and the novelties of learning in a different language. This anxiety can unfairly hinder their performance on exams. It may also lead to instances of cheating and other forms of academic dishonesty. The following are strategies for prioritizing exam integrity among international students through intentional course design interventions:

- **Incorporate low-stakes and alternative assessment opportunities**. Assessing student learning through one or two exams places an emphasis on grades and performance in a high-stakes environment (Lang, 2013, pp. 18-27). Incorporating frequent, low-stakes assessments, such as weekly quizzes, writing assignments, or problem-sets, gives international students -- and all students -- an opportunity to check their understanding, identify gaps in their learning, and receive regular feedback. Alternatives to traditional exams, such as student presentations, portfolios, group projects, or lab demonstrations, also provide opportunities for demonstrating learning in authentic and meaningful ways.

- **Equip students with study strategies and time management skills.** International students often are not equipped with effective test-taking and time management skills. They may rely on rote memorization when studying or not know how to express their learning in an essay question using academic English. Exams can also place unfair linguistic demands on international students by requiring them to spend more time understanding the use of wording or phrases in test questions (Chavez and Longerbeam, 2016). Providing opportunities for students to complete practice exams or encouraging spaced retrieval of information can promote deeper learning and help build student self-efficacy. Being transparent about the structure of an exam and providing time estimates for how long students should spend on different question types also helps keep students on task.

- **Consider the presence of cultural biases in exam wording or examples**. It's common for exam questions and examples to unintentionally contain cultural biases or make cultural references that hinder the ability of international students to demonstrate what they have learned as intended. A test question that asks students to apply a concept to a current or historical event (e.g., political polarization in Congress or the Civil War) may create inequities for international students since they may not have background knowledge of these events (Shapiro et al., 2014). When writing test questions, focus on their clarity, the use of plain language, and examples that are universal to all students, regardless of their individual experiences and backgrounds.

Resources

Chavez, A. F. & Longerbeam, S. D. (2016). *Teaching across cultural strengths: A guide to balancing integrated and individuated cultural frameworks in college teaching.* Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.

Lang, J.M. (2013). *Cheating lessons: Learning from academic dishonesty*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Shapiro, S., Farrelly, R., & Tomas, Z. (2014). *Fostering international student success in higher education.* Alexandria, VA: TESOL International Association.

For more information or to discuss how you might incorporate these ideas into your courses, contact the Reinert Center by email *or submit a* consultation request form.