

# 2 UNIT

## Academic Life: Student and Instructor Roles

In his article, “Getting the Most out of the U.S. Higher Education Experience: An Inside Perspective,” Edward Bodine (2005) states that “for international students, who may be used to a different institutional culture and social organization at their home universities, U.S. campus life may seem to them strange, perplexing, and no doubt a little overwhelming, especially at the start of the school year.” For any new student, adjustment to life on campus can be both a frustrating and rewarding experience.

Unit 2 focuses on the daily lives of students and their instructors. It primarily concerns student-instructor behavior in the classroom and expectations instructors have of their students. It also deals with attitudes students have toward their instructors and class work.

By the end of the unit, you should be able to

- share cultural differences you have experienced in your classroom
- understand some common idiomatic expressions used by instructors and students
- design and conduct an interview to gather information to present to your class or group
- make a short presentation that summarizes information you have collected.

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## The Student Experience

The student experience in a North American academic environment can be as varied as individual students. However, students everywhere deal with quite similar concerns when adjusting to a new academic environment. To get accustomed to a new environment, students often turn to other students and learn from their experiences. Task 1 presents an interview of a student giving advice to other students who will be studying in the United States.

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### Task 1

In this interview, Apratim Sahay, an undergraduate student from India,<sup>1</sup> discusses his experiences during his first year at the University of Chicago and gives some advice to other Indians planning to study in the United States. As you read the interview, think about your own experiences in a different academic environment and how you would describe them. With your partner or group, discuss the questions that follow.

*What are classes really like?*

In one word: Fun. In two: Serious fun. Professors and students are genuinely interested in what they are doing. Most humanities and core classes are small (about 20) and discussion-oriented, which is a big change from the note-taking back in India. The classes here, especially in math and science, are going to take a lot out of you. New concepts will hit you at an extremely fast pace. All the groundwork they have been laying about this being a rigorous school, life of the mind blah-blah is for real. . . .

*What are the professors really like?*

All of them are incredibly smart. They are going to be some of the most frighteningly smart people you've ever met, the kinds with 3 Ph.D.s even in subjects they aren't teaching. They are going to continuously challenge you, at the same time they are extremely approachable (although intimidating) during office hours. Professors here are quite frankly a breed of their own, they are unique, and yes, crazy about their work . . . My physics prof is this goofy British guy who keeps doing weird stuff in class. He sat on a wheelchair today along with this fire extinguisher thing in this hand, then turned it on and went whizzing in the opposite direction! And we went on to derive the equations for rocket propulsion after that!

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<sup>1</sup> University of Chicago Prospective Students Advisory Committee (PSAC)'s International Student Profiles, <http://psac.uchicago.edu/profiles/tim.html>.

*What do you do for fun?*

I play squash, table tennis (ping pong here), and tennis. The Ratner Athletic Center . . . [has] awesome workout facilities, and a huge Olympic-size swimming pool. For this quarter, I'm not involved with any clubs and other activities because I have enough on my plate right now. But getting involved with the SASA (South Asian Student Association) and the newspapers is on my list for later.

*What challenges have you faced here? Were there things that were difficult to adjust to?*

Food. Food. Food. American food tastes like nothing you've tasted before. Think McDonalds and Pizza Hut. Think burgers and fries and pizzas 24/7, each day, every meal. . . . Think salads . . . that yucky green stuff that your mom forced you to eat. . . . You know that 64 kgs that you are allowed to bring, load it with food, masalas, achar, whatever you can find. Learn cooking from your mom. . . . And come prepared to be homesick. I missed home like nothing ever, trust me there will be times when you will be literally dying to speak Hindi. . . .

*How cold is it really?*

It gets cold, really really cold. It's the kind of cold that will make you wish that you had never been born, or if you are a clearer thinker, wish you had never come here. -20C is what it's going to be like. It's going to be so cold that your nose hairs will freeze, the coffee in your hand will freeze, polar bears will die. . . . Actually don't even try to imagine the cold. It's impossible; we in India can't fathom it. . . . But people survive; you will too. . . .

1. Does it appear that Apratim is adjusting well to university life in Chicago? Why or why not?
2. What clues does Apratim give you about what type of school he attends? What kind of student do you think he is?
3. Apratim refers to his professor as *this goofy British guy who keeps doing weird stuff in class*. What's his opinion of this professor? How can you tell? What does *goofy* and *weird stuff* mean?
4. Give a couple of examples of how this student exaggerates to make a point.
  - This student uses a lot of interesting expressions. Explain the expressions in italics.
    - life of the mind *blah-blah* is for real
    - Think burgers and fries and pizzas *24/7*
    - Think salads . . . that *yucky green stuff* your mom forced you to eat
    - I'm not involved with any clubs and other activities because *I have enough on my plate* right now.
    - The Ratner Athletic Center here has *awesome workout facilities*.
    - And don't even try to imagine the cold. . . . *We in India can't fathom it*.

**Task 2**

Working in pairs or in a group, discuss how your answers to the interview questions would be similar or different from Apratim's. Relate some of your experiences adjusting to your current academic environment.

What are classes like?

What are your instructors like?

What do you do for fun?

What challenges have you faced here?

What was the most significant adjustment you had to make?

What advice would you give to a student from another country who is planning to study in a North American college or university? The following expressions using *would* are useful:

I would tell someone that they<sup>2</sup>. . . .

I would tell them to . . . .

It would be good to . . . .

My advice would be to . . . .

Notice how the word *would* is used in this hypothetical situation to convey advice.<sup>3</sup> The language for giving advice and suggestions is covered in more detail in Unit 4.

**Video Task****Unit 2: Student Life****Scenes 1–2**

In these scenes, students are talking about some of the ways they have had to adjust to life at a U.S. university. In Scene 1, an international student is talking about some differences between the United States and his home country; in Scene 2, a U.S.-born student is talking about his first year living in a dormitory.

In these scenes, what active listening strategies does each of the listeners use to provide feedback to the speaker and keep the conversation going? What differences do you notice?

<sup>2</sup> In conversational English, instead of referring to someone as *he* or *she*, it is common to use the plural *they*.

<sup>3</sup> A subordinate *if* clause can precede the main clause in these hypothetical situations, such as, *If I were going to give some advice to new students, I would tell them that they should keep up with their homework.*