Awareness Points for Interacting with International Students
(by Dr. Helaine Minkus, Geography/Anthropology, UWEC)

International students come from a great many countries, which differ culturally from each other as well as from the United States. Some points can be generalized, however.

1. Speak in a way that is appropriate to the student’s level of competence in English. New students, especially those on an ESL program, may have problems understanding rapid conversational English and will need you to speak slowly and very clearly. Don’t shout but pronounce words clearly and avoid slang expressions. To speak in the same slow way to a student whose English is fluent may be perceived as an insult. However, even if students are fluent, they may not be familiar with slang, acronyms, etc.

   It is a good idea to write down any information that it is critical that the students have: names of people to see, phone numbers, etc. Pay attention to signs that the student may not understand what you are saying. As a check, ask them to explain to you what you have said. If you simply ask, “do you understand?” they are likely to answer “yes” to avoid embarrassment.

2. In some countries, the family name is given first and then the personal name so it is less confusing if you ask for their “family” name than for their second name.

3. Americans place great importance on being independent and self-reliant and expect people to show initiative. In much of the world, young people are raised to be part of a group and expect that those in a superior position will take the initiative and tell them what courses to take, what to write a paper on, etc. Americans may regard a person who can’t make their own decisions as weak. The international student may view advisors and professors as uncaring if they are told they have to do things on their own.

4. Americans generally except that a person who needs help will ask for it but in many countries people expect that others will be sensitive and will offer help.

5. Talking to strangers about problems is not common in many countries, and students may find it difficult to talk about their emotions to someone who is not a friend or family member.

6. People in some countries (parts of Western Europe) speak more directly than Americans from the upper Midwest and people in other countries (much of Asia) speak much less directly.

7. Americans may expect that a person who disagrees will say no and make their objection clear although even Americans find it difficult. Concern for the other person’s face makes it very difficult for people from some countries to say no, especially if they are dealing with a superior.

8. The American emphasis on punctuality and scheduling, efficiency and hard work is regarded as obsessive by people in many other countries. It seems that all Americans think about is work and they don’t know how to enjoy life. To succeed in the U.S., students will probably have to adapt to a large extent but it may take some time.
9. Americans regard someone who doesn’t maintain eye contact as lacking in self-confidence, uninterested or suspicious. Direct eye contact is regarded as threatening in some areas and politeness calls for only brief eye contact or looking away from the speaker.

10. Americans often think that one should present a strong self-image but the same behavior may be regarded as arrogant in other countries where one is expected to be humble.

11. Especially in the upper Midwest, Americans expect the bureaucracy to work. In many countries, the bureaucracy must be manipulated by calling upon personal connections or bribes. Students raised in such societies may seem manipulated to Americans and may cause resentment if they try to go over the head of someone lower in the hierarchy to make connections with a more important person higher up.