

CHAPTER 4

ACADEMICS

Any academic system reflects the surrounding culture. Since American culture differs significantly from Chinese culture, the American and Chinese higher-education systems are quite different from each other.

Our discussion of the U.S. higher-education system comes under these headings:

- 4.1 Distinguishing Features of U.S. Academic System
 - 4.2 Challenging Aspects for Chinese Students
 - 4.3 Special Concerns for Graduate Assistants
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4.1 Distinguishing Features of U.S. Academic

- 4.1.1 Cultural Foundations
- 4.1.2 Daily Operations
- 4.1.3 A Summary: Teachers and Students in Collectivist vs Individualist Societies

4.1.1 Cultural Foundations

Conceptions of “education” vary from place to place. American conceptions about education are discussed under these headings:

- 4.1.1.1 Education as a Productive Activity
- 4.1.1.2 What is a “Fact”
- 4.1.1.3 Who Produces Knowledge
- 4.1.1.4 How Scholars Present What They Think They Know
- 4.1.1.5 Who Owns Knowledge
- 4.1.1.6 What “Scholarship” Means

Except where otherwise noted, ideas in this section come from the work of Alisa Eland (2001).

4.1.1.1 Education as a Productive Activity

In many countries, including China, students are taught to view education as a *receptive* activity. Education is seen as a process of absorbing information and ideas from scholars who know a great deal. In the U.S. educational system, by contrast, education is viewed more as a *productive* activity. It is a process of acquiring and interpreting information about and a better understanding of things no one completely knows or understands.

In China, students have traditionally excelled by memorizing large quantities of material provided by professors, authors, or other experts. In the United States, by contrast, being able to memorize material is less important than being able to *analyze and synthesize* material from many sources and to develop one's own ideas and viewpoints. See the box below for discussion of these concepts.

Analysis and Synthesis

To *analyze* is to break into small parts for careful study. To *synthesize* is to bring together and combine in a new way.

For example, an assignment or examination question might say: "Article A argues that a person's genetic heritage is responsible for about 80 percent of the person's behaviors. What evidence does the author of Article A use to support this conclusion? Do you agree with the author's conclusions? Why or why not?"

Another example: Article X supports the idea that the United Nations holds the key to future peaceful development in the world. Article Y argues that the United Nations is no longer relevant and deserves no support. Which article do you think best supports its conclusion?

A final example: Do you think it will be possible to develop a computer that will consistently defeat even the best human chess players? How do you support your point of view?

Particularly at the graduate level, students are expected to produce "original thinking" in their areas of specialization. For students from China, being expected to produce original ideas is often a new concept that can be difficult to grasp and act upon. Professors will ask them, "What do *you* think about this?" Until they come to understand the assumption underlying that question, they find it difficult to reply.

U.S. professors often say that learning how to approach studies independently, to analyze and synthesize material, and to develop their own approaches and ideas are the most difficult intellectual challenges facing new Chinese students, especially graduate students.

(This notion of education as a receptive vs. a productive activity comes from cross-cultural trainer Robert Kohls.)

4.1.1.2 What is a "Fact"

U.S. higher education reflects the society's general faith in the "scientific method" for determining the "facts." Facts are considered much more central to academic work than are opinions, impressions, or emotions. Facts are "objective," as the Americans see the world. Facts are determined when trained people use appropriate equipment or methods to *count* whatever it is they are trying to understand. Americans are more likely than

Chinese to believe that things can be studied in isolation, apart from their background or context. They are taught to assume the existence of an “objective” universe that can be better understood through proper methods.

4.1.1.3 Who Produces Knowledge

In the general American conception, academic knowledge comes from scholars, which generally means people with doctoral degrees (or, in some fields, extensive practical experience) who have done “scientific research.” The results of that research have been subject to review by other qualified scholars. Then the results have been published in a recognized professional journal or in a book produced by a respected publisher.

4.1.1.4 How Scholars Present What They Think They Know

American academic thinking and writing is expected to be *explicit* and *linear*. Writers are expected to state their points directly and even repeatedly, leaving nothing ambiguous. All the material in a piece of writing is expected to be relevant to the topic; digressions are discouraged. American academic writing generally omits emotion. It is *impersonal*. In many of these ways, Americans’ presentation of scholarly work contrasts with traditional Chinese conceptions and practices. Indeed, the Chinese language itself can make American-style clarity and directness difficult.

4.1.1.5 Who Owns Knowledge

The general American emphasis on individualism and individual achievement is reflected in conceptions of the ownership of knowledge. Even though a scholar’s ideas may be spoken in public or printed in publications that are widely available, the ideas are considered to be the *property* of the person who developed them. The ideas or methods do not *belong* to the public. One implication of this is that scholars (including students) must *properly acknowledge the source of ideas they borrow from publications or lectures*. See Sec. 4.2.5 on “Academic Honesty.” Otherwise they are seen as stealing someone’s ideas, like a thief.

Examples of these acknowledgments appear throughout this publication; one is in the next paragraph.

4.1.1.6 What “Scholarship” Means

The word “scholarship” often refers to financial support for a student, but it can have another meaning. “Scholarship” can also refer to the work that scholars do—their research, writing, and teaching. In a publication for university-level teachers, the director of the University of Iowa Center for Teaching, Thomas Rocklin, discussed three characteristics of this “scholarship.” Understanding these ideas can help Chinese students understand the system in which they are studying.

First, Rocklin wrote, scholarship “stands in relation to what has come before.” Scholars begin by studying the work of other people in their field, and they normally summarize some of that work when they report on their own. Wrote Rocklin, “We would not have all spent time as students learning to identify and properly cite books, articles, and other resources were it not for the value our disciplines attach to prior work.”

Second, scholars present their work to the public, usually by publishing it, so others can criticize it. This criticism is a routine part of scholarship, and it sometimes troubles people from cultures where there is a high value placed on politeness, deference to authority, and respect for other people. Rocklin: “...learning to criticize, be criticized, and rebut criticism are key challenges of graduate study.”

Third, a scholar’s arguments or viewpoints need to be supported by something more than the author’s opinions. Some form of “evidence” is required. What is accepted as evidence varies from one academic discipline to another. Rocklin gives an example from his field of educational psychology, where “scholarly assertions are buttressed by quantitative data meeting agreed-upon standards for reliability and validity and analyzed using agreed-upon statistical procedures.”

Rocklin’s entire essay is available at
www.uiowa.edu/~centeach/talk/index.html#volume4

4.1.2 Daily Operations

Aspects of the daily workings of a U.S. college and university are described under these headings:

- 4.1.2.1 Decentralization
- 4.1.2.2 Teacher’s Role
- 4.1.2.3 Student’s Role
- 4.1.2.4 Teacher-Student Relations
- 4.1.2.5 Student-Student Relations
- 4.1.2.6 What Happens in Classes
- 4.1.2.7 What Happens Outside of Classes
- 4.1.2.8 The Educational Bureaucracy

4.1.2.1 Decentralization

Students coming from a centralized educational system such as China’s sometimes have difficulty comprehending just how decentralized the U.S. system is.

The United States has no ministry of education in the way that term is usually understood. The faculty (that is, the collection of professors) of each educational institution is responsible for setting the admissions standards and academic requirements for students at the institution. The faculty of each department determine what courses the department will offer. The professors teaching those courses decide what their courses

will include (what books and articles students will be assigned to read, what papers they will have to write, how the material will be presented) and how student learning will be assessed.

In their classrooms and in their research and publications U.S. professors enjoy “academic freedom,” a term used to convey the idea that no authority is empowered to dictate what and how a professor will teach or disseminate results of research.

Thus students will find considerable variation in the ways teachers (including professors and any others who might be teaching) organize their classes, present material, and assess students’ progress.

4.1.2.2 Teacher’s Role

The professor in each class is responsible for preparing the course “syllabus,” a document that explains the course’s goals and gives information about assignments, test dates, and the means for determining students’ grades. Students normally receive the syllabus at the first class meeting.

The professor will see that new material is presented and, presumably, that students feel motivated to learn it. The professor will decide whether student progress is to be assessed by means of their class participation, “homework” assignments, performance on quizzes or examinations, and/or essays, papers, or other projects.

In addition, some professors serve as academic advisers to undergraduate students, helping them decide what courses they should take in order to reach their educational goals. Professors at universities serve as academic advisers for graduate students, not just helping them decide what courses to take, but also what research topics to pursue and how to pursue them. These faculty advisers work with graduate students through the academic aspects of research and writing for a thesis or dissertation.

Teachers (including professors and *graduate teaching assistants*--see Sec. 4.3 for a definition of this term) are expected to be available to students during some designated “office hours” each week. Teachers will inform students, usually on the syllabus, whether they need an appointment to see the teacher during office hours or can just “drop by.”

4.1.2.3 Student’s Role

Students are expected to:

- Know and adhere to the institution’s requirements, rules, procedures, and deadlines for such matters as meeting with academic advisers, registering for classes, changing course registrations, paying bills, preparing theses or dissertations (for graduate students), and registering to graduate
- Know and adhere to each teacher’s requirements, rules, procedures, and deadlines for each class
- Prepare for each class by doing assignments and reviewing material

- Attend class
- Participate in class by asking questions, making comments, and even, perhaps, questioning or challenging the teacher
- Do homework assignments, which may involve reading, writing, or a project
- Study and review throughout the course, and particularly in preparation for quizzes, tests, or examinations
- Take examinations

Once graduate students have completed the courses required for the master's or doctoral degree, they are expected to devise a thesis or dissertation topic and method. In consultation with the faculty adviser and faculty committee, they carry out the research or project and write the scholarly paper. Students are expected to consult with the academic adviser and the committee, but are expected to take most of the initiative in these matters themselves.

4.1.2.4 Teacher-Student Relations

In the Chinese tradition, students revere teachers. Teachers speak and students listen. Students treat teachers with open and presumably complete respect. University teachers may have life-long relationships with their students, whom they advise not just on academic matters but perhaps also on career and even personal and family matters.

Americans are taught to question authority more than to respect it. So American students' attitudes toward their professors are generally quite different from Chinese students' attitudes toward theirs. U.S. students will question and sometimes challenge their teachers—except for those relatively few teachers whose behavior makes it clear that they do not welcome challenges from students. This questioning and disagreeing is not considered disrespectful. In fact, it is usually interpreted as a sign of the students' healthy interest in the course.

Students, particularly graduate students, may (but may not) have quite informal relationships with their professors, especially their academic adviser. They may call advisers by their first or given name, visit their office without any advance notice, and even socialize with them. The relationship may be somewhat less informal if the student and adviser are of different genders.

What to Call the Professor

“Forms of academic address are...intensely personal [and are] also tied up with far-ranging trends and issues of gender, prestige, and cultural change,” according to Professor of English Ben Yogada (2003). Yogada's informal survey of what college and university instructors prefer to be called did not point to any single practice. Students were more likely to address their teachers by first name at smaller schools, in smaller classes, and when the instructor was younger, male, and in the humanities. “You can never be sure” how a teacher wants to be addressed unless he or she tells you, according to Yogada.

Students are expected to take the initiative in their relationships with their academic advisers—to arrange meetings or conversations, ask questions, request help, and make suggestions.

Faculty members are *not expected to have a role in the non-academic lives of students*. Unlike professors in China, U.S. faculty members are not seen as elders to whom students can turn for non-academic advice and assistance. In practice some American faculty members take an active interest in their advisees' general life situations or at least in their professional careers, but that is something they as individuals decide to do. It is not generally expected or required.

4.1.2.5 Student-Student Relations

U.S. students generally view fellow students more as competitors than as cooperators. This is particularly true in classes where the instructor grades “on the curve,” meaning that only a limited number of students in the class can get high grades.

Other factors contributing to the lack of cooperation (as Chinese students are likely to see it) among U.S. students are their concerns for privacy and their belief in self-reliance. American students will study or work on projects in groups if they are assigned to do so. They may also organize informal study groups, but even then there may be limits on what they will share. They do not have the idea that they are responsible for assuring that other students do well in their studies.

The system assumes that, even if students study or work on a project together, there will ultimately be some means by which the professor can assess the work, contributions, and progress of each individual. The focus is the *individual*, not the group. Each individual is supposed to learn the material and contribute to the work of any group the teacher organizes.

4.1.2.6 What Happens in Classes

Classes in U.S. colleges and universities take many forms. Generally, undergraduate classes are larger and more likely to be lecture-based. Graduate classes are typically smaller and less reliant on lectures. More and more teachers use some form of “technology” in their classrooms or expect students to use it outside classes.

Classes may entail lectures, classroom discussion (involving both the teacher and any students who speak up), seminars (where the students in a small class discuss or debate about a topic), laboratory demonstrations or “lab work,” small-group discussions (in which a larger class is broken into smaller groups for discussion of which the teacher is not part), viewing a video, engaging in a simulation (which imitates a real-life situation), or using computers or other technological devices to gather or manipulate information.

In general, what is happening in classes is that new material or a new viewpoint on old material is being presented, or students are considering or reviewing some material, or some assessment activity (quiz, test, examination) is in progress.

Some classes take place in laboratories, where students will carry out a practical activity.

4.1.2.7 What Happens Outside of Classes

Outside of class hours, students are expected to “do their homework,” review, prepare for the next class meeting, and make progress on any long-term assignments such as essays or “papers.”

The homework may entail some specified reading or some writing task. Sometimes homework entails meeting with group of students to accomplish a task that has been assigned to the whole group.

4.1.2.8 The Educational Bureaucracy

Offices. Chinese and other foreign students are sometimes bewildered by the number and variety of offices on a typical U.S. campus. There are “academic service” offices or staff for admissions, orientation, the registrar (the scheduler and record-keeper), and financial aid. There are “student service” offices or staff members concerned with housing, physical health, mental health, foreign-student services, recreation, entertainment, student activities, and perhaps others. Not all students deal with all these offices, but all will deal with some of them.

Rules, procedures, and deadlines. Schools have specific rules, procedures, and deadlines related to many aspects of student life, including graduation requirements, registration for classes and changes in registration, which classes fulfill which graduation requirements, billing for tuition and fees, applying for exemptions from certain requirements, applying for graduation, and formatting of theses and dissertations. Students are considered responsible for knowing and following rules, procedures, and deadlines related to their particular situations.

Rules for citation. Each academic field has its own “style” for the citations that writers (including students) put in their papers to acknowledge the sources (see Sec. 4.2.5, on “Academic Honesty”) of the material they are presenting. Students are expected to follow these styles when they write papers.

4.1.3 A Summary: Teachers and Students in Collectivist vs. Individualist Societies

The chart on the following page uses the concepts of “collectivist” and “individualist” societies to compare aspects of the educational systems of collectivist cultures such as China to individualist cultures such as that of the United States.

The direct source of this chart is Li Qing (1995), who drew on the work of H. Douglas Brown (1994) and Geerte Hofstede (1986).

In this chart, Li Qing was attempting to generalize about a large number of societies that social scientists label “individualist” and “collectivist.” Certainly there will be exceptions and qualifications, particularly in China, a huge country that is undergoing major changes. Readers should not expect every idea in this chart to reflect the current reality in all parts of China or any other place. Even so, the chart helps convey some important contrasts.

4.2 Challenging Aspects for Chinese Students

The particular differences between Chinese and American culture and between the Chinese and the American academic systems mean that students from China are likely to face particular challenges:

- 4.2.1 Using English
- 4.2.2 Making All the Choices
- 4.2.3 Assertiveness
- 4.2.4 “Creative” or “Original” Thinking
- 4.2.5 “Academic Honesty”
- 4.2.6 Relating with Academic Advisers

4.2.1 Using English

Americans often have difficulty understanding Chinese students’ pronunciation, intonation, and vocabulary.

U.S. professors often report that their Chinese students’ ability to write in English is too limited. This becomes a major problem in writing theses (for master’s degrees) and dissertations (for doctoral degrees), unless the thesis or dissertation is composed mainly of mathematical symbols.

Chinese students often report difficulty in understanding classroom lectures, participating in classroom discussions, and socializing outside the Chinese community.

Chinese students typically believe they can overcome all of these problems by studying hard. They resist taking English-as-a-second-language (ESL) classes. (See the box below on students’ resistance to ESL classes.) They tend to live and socialize with other Chinese, further hindering their learning of English.

In fact, many Chinese students achieve outstanding academic records, often in part by studying for long, long hours. Hard work does not overcome English deficiencies, though, when the students look for teaching assistantships, internships, summer jobs, or post-graduation employment. In those situations, Chinese students with better English have major advantages.

Teachers and Students in Collectivist vs. Individualist Societies

Collectivist Societies	Individualist Societies
Positive association in society with anything rooted in tradition	Positive association in society with anything “new”
The <i>young</i> should learn; adults do not belong in the student role	A person is never too old to learn. “Lifelong learning” an ideal
Students expect to learn how to do things	Students expect to learn how to learn
Individual students will speak up in class only when called upon personally by the teacher	Individual students will speak up in class in response to a general invitation from the teacher, and may speak up without invitation
Individuals will speak up only in small groups	Individuals will speak up in large groups
Large classes split socially into smaller, cohesive subgroups based on particularistic criteria such as ethnic identification	Subgroupings in class vary from one situation to another based on universalistic criteria such as the nature of the task to be accomplished
Formal harmony in learning situations should be maintained at all times	Confrontation in learning situations can be a positive thing; conflicts can be brought into the open
Neither the teacher nor the student should ever be made to lose face	Face-consciousness is weak
Education is a way of gaining prestige in one’s social environment and of joining a higher-status group	Education is a way of improving one’s economic worth and self-respect based on ability and competence
Diplomas are important, and are likely to be displayed on walls	Diplomas have little symbolic value
Acquiring certificates, even through questionable means, is more important than acquiring competence	Acquiring competence is more important than acquiring certificates
Teachers are expected to give preferential treatment to some students (e.g., based on ethnic affiliation or on recommendation by an influential person)	Teachers are expected to be strictly impartial

4.2.2 Making All the Choices

The American higher-education system requires students to make many choices, such as:

- What subject should I study?
- Once I know what subject I will study, what courses should I take each term?
- In my courses, what topics should I chose for my research papers?
- Who should be my academic adviser?
- What should my thesis or dissertation topic be?
- What methodology should I use in my research?

Chinese Students Resist ESL Classes

Two ESL instructors from George Washington University in Washington, D.C., wrote: “When they are assigned to English courses after the English-language placement test [which they take after arriving at the school in the United States], Chinese students usually react in one of two predictable ways: they petition for a waiver from the courses, or (in most cases) they request placement at a higher level.”

Connerton and Reid 1986

In China, students generally have not learned to deal with issues of this kind. The curriculum is prescribed. The requirements are the same for everyone. The teacher tells the student what to do.

When they come to the United States, Chinese students need to learn to make many of their own decisions about their academic careers.

4.2.3 Assertiveness

Traditional Chinese “respect” for teachers is at least one factor that inhibits them from speaking up in class, questioning or challenging a teacher, and asking for help when they need it. The American classroom assumes that students will speak up for themselves, expressing their ideas and saying what they need. Some degree of this “assertiveness” is necessary for success in the U.S. system.

4.2.4 “Creative” or “Original” Thinking

U.S. professors frequently express frustration over the “lack of creativity” of their Chinese students, particularly those at the graduate level. Since Americans view higher education as a productive activity (see Sec. 4.1.1.1), they expect university students, especially graduate students, to produce their own ideas. This approach is usually unfamiliar to Chinese students, whose tradition requires them more to learn what others who are older and wiser say about a topic, and not to presume they can add something new themselves.

Chinese students are often frustrated by the kinds of questions, frequent in American assignments and examinations, that call on them to produce their own ideas. Some examples:

- Do you agree or disagree with what the writer of this [assigned article] said? Why?
- In your mind, what were the main points of this [assigned] book or article?
- Of the two articles you read on this topic, which do you think made the strongest argument?
- What is your opinion on the question of [some issue in the field]? What support do you have for your point of view?

Of course, the final step in an American Ph.D. program is the dissertation, which must represent “original research” or contribute some new idea to the field.

To succeed in the U.S. system, Chinese students have to change their assumption that “education” means taking in and memorizing large quantities of information to the assumption that “education” means looking things in new ways and helping develop new knowledge and understanding.

4.2.5 “Academic Honesty”

It is not rare for Chinese students to be punished by U.S. colleges and universities for “plagiarism.”

Essentially, plagiarism means submitting written work that is copied word-for-word or with only minor variations from some publication, and not making clear who the original author was and where the words originally appeared.

American academic people regard plagiarism as a kind of theft. It is a major offense against the rules and traditions of academe. Punishment for plagiarism can include dismissal from the school.

Dismissed from the University

“I know what I did was copying that I’m not supposed to do, but I didn’t expect that they’d kick me out of school!” said the Chinese student who had just received a letter from the dean’s office. The letter said that the student had committed an act of plagiarism and would not be allowed to continue at the university.

“This isn’t fair!” the student told his foreign-student adviser. “I was under so much pressure. I had so many papers to write. My wife was sick and we have a small baby to take care of. I was very tired. I just didn’t have time to write all those papers. I had to copy from a book I found that had a chapter about the topic of my paper. I tried to explain this to the teacher, but he wouldn’t understand me.”

In the U.S. academic’s mind, *there is no excuse for plagiarism. None.* It does not matter that a student is sick, or very far behind in his or her studies, or under pressure from a family to accomplish something. Plagiarism is wrong. Period.

To understand why Americans take plagiarism so seriously, it helps to understand that Americans regard published ideas as the property, in a sense, of the person who wrote them. To use them without giving credit is like stealing them. It is to be dishonest and deceitful. It is not, as it has traditionally been viewed in China (see the box on the next page), to show the student’s diligence in locating well chosen words to make a student’s point.

Trained to Plagiarize?

American Peter Hessler spent two years teaching English in Fuling, in Sichuan Province. In papers his students wrote for class he observed much of what Americans would consider plagiarism. He explained the situation this way:

“[The students] were accustomed to learning by rote, which meant that they often followed models to the point of plagiarism. They were also inveterate copiers; it wasn’t uncommon [for me] to receive the exact same paper from two or three students. There wasn’t really a sense of wrong associated with these acts—all through school [the students] had been taught to imitate models, and copy things, and accept what they were told without question, and often that was what they did.”

(Hessler 2001, 100)

There are indications that Chinese attitudes toward plagiarism might be changing. In August, 2004, Peking University Associate Professor of English Huang Zongying was dismissed from his position after a review showed that many of his scholarly publications included plagiarized material. The *China Daily’s* web site reported this story at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2004-08/06/content_362347.htm, under the heading, “Beijing University Teacher Sacked for Plagiarism.”

According to an account of this same event in the September 3, 2004, issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (an American publication with news from the academic world), Peking University “first heard accusations that Mr. Huang had plagiarized after a Chinese graduate student in New Jersey [U.S.A.] posted an article on a Chinese-language Web site, Academic Criticism, which discussed academic issues in China.” (p. A49)

The student, Zhong Shanhu, posted his article on January 2, the *Chronicle* said.

Wise students learn and *always* use the footnoting or other means of acknowledging their sources that are usual in their fields of study. Teachers and advisers will help students learn these practices.

4.2.6 Relating with Academic Advisers

A study sponsored by the Institute of International Education found that

the qualities [academic] advisors look for in advisees—the ability to come up with a well-defined topic, with the initiative to pursue an idea on their own, with well-developed research and writing skills—are the very qualities that foreign students, particularly Asians, are less likely than Americans to possess. Thus advisor expectations and advisee needs are less likely to mesh in the case of the foreign student. (Friedman 1987, 98)

This generalization about Asian students probably applies in general to Chinese students, who may expect more guidance from their academic advisers than the academic advisers usually give.

U.S. professors may have the idea that it is more helpful for students to struggle to learn “on their own” than it is to directly help them each step of the way.

Chinese graduate students need to learn to be assertive and to take initiative in dealing with their advisers. Otherwise they may experience more frustration than is necessary and their courses of study may be longer than necessary.

4.3. Special Concerns for Graduate Assistants

Many Chinese students have or hope to obtain graduate assistantships to cover the cost of their education in the United States. Here is some information for prospective graduate assistants:

Terms. *Graduate assistant* is the generic term for a graduate student hired by an academic department (usually his or her own) to perform some kind of service. *Teaching assistants* do some form of teaching, perhaps presenting lectures, conducting discussions, or meeting with individual students who need academic help. *Research assistants* help faculty members with research projects or other scholarly activities.

Who gets assistantships? Generally speaking, graduate assistantships are awarded to students with the best academic records. In some fields of study, graduate assistantships are relatively plentiful, and most or all graduate students in the department will have one. In other fields assistantships are scarce, so competition is fierce.

In the case of non-native speakers of English, obtaining a teaching assistantship normally requires satisfactory performance on a test of English fluency.

Paperwork. Before they can be paid for their work, graduate assistants need to complete various employment-related forms and to obtain a U.S. social security number. All this can entail visiting various offices, and some delays.

Relationship with supervisor. A graduate assistant's supervisor is essentially his or her "boss" on a job. The supervisor may or may not be the student's own academic adviser.

Conflicts with own studies. Most graduate assistants, American as well as foreign, must deal with a built-in conflict between their assistantship duties and their own studies. Performing well as a graduate assistant can prevent graduate students from performing well in their own studies because graduate-assistant duties can be very time-consuming.

Unexpected interruptions in duties. Graduate students sometimes cannot carry out their assistantship duties for personal reasons such as illness, accident, or childbirth. Assistantship letters or contracts should specify procedures for such instances (for example, whether the stipend will continue, who will carry out the duties for the person who temporarily cannot work, etc.)