Welcome to Brandeis!

My name is Susan Parker and I am a professor in the mathematics department. I teach and coordinate (along with my colleague Professor Rebecca Torrey) the calculus classes here at Brandeis, so I have gotten to know many international students over the years. International students are often among the strongest students in our math classes, and they are certainly among the most motivated.

You are all talented students who have already had success in your academic studies, but success at Brandeis will require you to adapt to a new educational system, and in particular to learn a new set of expectations from your instructors. Below are a few suggestions to help introduce you to an American university.

(1) Speak up in class sometime early in the semester: answer an instructor’s question or pose a question of your own. American instructors and students value an interactive classroom, where students feel comfortable asking questions and suggesting answers. You may not be used to this type of classroom environment, but it’s important that you make an effort to adapt to it. As I mentioned, start doing this early in the semester; if you wait too long it will feel harder to begin.

(2) If you answer a question incorrectly, it’s OK! We’re all used to this happening in American classrooms, and there’s no shame in it. In fact, I feel (and many faculty would agree) that making mistakes is an essential part of learning and I respect students who are willing to make mistakes in front of others.

(3) Go to each of your instructor’s office hours sometime early in the semester. You can just go to introduce yourself, or you can bring some question (even a simple question) about the course. Visiting an instructor’s office hours is a good way to get to know that instructor and—even more importantly—for him or her to get to know you. If you form a connection with an instructor, it will be easier to talk to him or her later if you have questions or difficulties in the course. It will also be easier, sometime in the future, to ask that instructor for a letter of recommendation, and the letter will be stronger and more vivid if the instructor has genuinely gotten to know you.

(4) Most important of all: work hard at mastering both your written and oral English language skills. Sometimes international students think that having good quantitative skills and succeeding in (for example) math and economics courses is sufficient for success at Brandeis. It is not! You’ll find the good English skills are necessary, even in subjects like math—especially in the more advanced classes. Moreover, in order to accomplish essential things like finding internships and
getting good letters of recommendation from Brandeis faculty you must have excellent language skills. The English language and writing programs at Brandeis give you the resources to master those skills, so make sure you take full advantage of those resources.

One of my favorite international students took calculus with me during his first year here. He came to office hours a number of times, and spoke up in class even though he sometimes felt shy. He stayed in touch with me after that class, visiting me in my office once or twice a semester and always keeping me up to date on what he was doing. So I was delighted to write him a very strong letter of recommendation, first when he applied to study abroad (he spent a year in Oxford) and then again when he applied for graduate school. The student was accepted into a top MBA program here in the States, and also had multiple job offers from leading consulting companies.

This student was typical of our strong international students, with his impressive academic ability and his terrific work ethic. He also made full use of the opportunities provided by Brandeis to improve his English language skills and his comfort with American classrooms. His current success reflects that, and I urge you to follow his model.