

International Students: Supporting Their Transition to the United States

Herlina Pranata, Ph.D.

Natacha Foo-Kune, Ph.D.

Emil Rodolfa, Ph.D.

University of California, Davis

This paper describes a number of stresses experienced by international students in the United States. These are discussed and a number of interventions which have proven useful for international students are described.

Changing Norms: International students come from many cultures and have to adjust to life in the U.S., as well as to the culture specific to their campus and/or department. The norms that applied in their home countries are likely to be very different from those operating in the U.S. For international students, adjusting to university life is complicated by the fact that they need to learn and negotiate cultural issues first to have access to the academic, social and other resources at the university.

For example, in the U.S., it is expected that students will ask questions, whereas in many other cultures, it is considered disrespectful to question the professor. Undoubtedly, this cultural difference will be an issue for international students when they are taking a class, and even more so for those graduate students who work as a teaching or research assistants. Conversely, a culturally unaware faculty member may perceive these students as “not engaged” with the material, and attribute their reticence to a lack of understanding or a lack of interest. In addition, when teaching a class, the International Student TA may feel disrespected by students who ask questions.

Culture Shock: The process of adjusting to a new culture follows a somewhat predictable pattern. Ogberg (1960) was the first to describe the four stages attached to culture shock: honeymoon, crisis, recovery and adjustment. International students may experience excessive anxiety during the crisis period, when they doubt their ability to achieve. At this point, they often assume their current crisis is permanent and caused by some personal (internal) deficiencies.

For example, after the initial exhilaration of being in a new country, international students may start feeling alienated by the unspoken rules that govern behavior in the U.S., such as timeliness. As they

begin to “recover” from this crisis, they may start having a sense of humor about the cultural differences they are experiencing. Over time, the international student often begins to develop an emotional home in the U.S., as they create a local support network and come to feel an enhanced sense of control. In this stage, they can understand the cultural conflicts and make compromises regarding how to adjust.

Friendships: Many international students may find it difficult to initiate and maintain friendships due to the pattern of friendship development in the U.S. that differs from the typical pattern of friendship development in the student’s home country. In the U.S., people tend to be quite friendly with people they have just met, but this does not indicate deep friendships. However, in many other cultures, strangers are not particularly friendly to each other, but once they start considering someone as a friend, they will open their doors without reserve. Therefore, the initial friendly behavior of American students can be quite confusing to the international student who may feel that these students are too forward, or may feel disappointed when they find they cannot rely on them in the way they thought the friendly behavior suggested they could.

Performance Pressure: Many international students feel extensive pressure to perform well. Some may feel that they are representing their country, and do not want to embarrass their nation by their poor performance. As a result, they may decide to focus heavily on their academic work, to the detriment of social relationships and support.

For example, an international student may seek mental health services at the suggestion of a professor after a poor performance on papers or exams. The student will likely focus on how to improve their grades. After a thorough assessment, it often will become clear that the student is spending most of their waking hours studying, and the student may report trouble concentrating. The student has no or few friends because s/he thinks that the way to improve performance is to work harder.

Racism: Racism or xenophobia is another issue that often affects international students. Based on phenotype, international students may look like other African Americans, Latinos or Asian Americans, resulting in incidents of perceived discrimination, and/or racial profiling. International students from African countries may be surprised when they are followed in stores, or when they are stopped by the

police. Students from Latin American and Arab or Muslim countries may face extreme scrutiny when traveling to the United States. Students from Asian American countries may face students who walk out of their class as soon as they realize that the TA is Asian. These students may presume that Asian TAs will automatically be difficult to understand.

Language: International students come to the U.S. with a wide range of language ability. For some students, a lower mastery level of English may lead to frustration when communicating with English speaking individuals. International students may be treated as if they are less intelligent by professors and peers due to their accents or difficulty expressing thoughts and ideas. Realistically, it may take these students more time to study due to the difficulty absorbing the material in a foreign language. Further, given that mental health services are usually provided in English on campuses, the students may have more difficulty accessing their emotions than if they were able to express themselves in their native language.

Families: Many international graduate students come to the U.S. with their families. This can lead to a difficult situation where the family no longer has access to the support systems they enjoyed at home. Conversely, other graduate students may be dealing with the stress of having left their spouses and children in their home countries.

For instance, a graduate student who enters the U.S. with her husband and two children may struggle with the difficulty of balancing her time between her coursework, research and family life. In addition, her husband may not be allowed to work due to visa restrictions and, as a result, will feel isolated and alone. These dilemmas may lead to additional conflicts within the family.

Somatic Stress: International students may express their level of stress in somatic terms (e.g., Tanaka-Matsumi & Draguns, 1997). However, some health-care providers in the U.S. do not always recognize mental distress in somatic symptoms. Conversely, mental health providers may misdiagnose an international student because they fail to consider unusual somatic symptoms during their assessment.

Thus, international students who present at the student health center, complaining of frequent colds, GI distress, back pain, and fatigue, should be assessed carefully, for stress and emotional issues.

Mental Health: A common concern is the low rate of utilization for mental health services for international students. Their reticence to seek help is often related to stigma that their culture may attach to counseling. Counseling may be viewed as appropriate only for “crazy” people. Resistance to use

counseling may also be related to the cultural taboo of sharing private or family information with strangers. International students may also be concerned that counselors will not understand their culture and as a result these students may not take advantage of the mental health services on campus. The research on utilization rates for international students is limited, and provide a wide range, which make it difficult to draw definite conclusions regarding underutilization. For instance, a study conducted at a large public university on the West Coast found that only 14% of their sample of international students used counseling services (Harju, Long & Allred, 1998). However, another study, also conducted at a large public university, but in the Midwest, indicates that only 2% of their sample of international students accessed counseling (Nilsson, Berkel, Flores & Lucas, 2004). Guinee and Ness (2000) suggest that the range of service utilization rates for all college students is between 1.5% to 18% for individual counseling services. Nonetheless, the current general consensus in the literature is that international students underutilize services (e.g., Leong & Chou, 2002; Martinez, Huan, Johnson & Edwards, 1989).

When international students seek mental health services, they often describe how it took them a long time before deciding to see a therapist. They typically explain that they were afraid that anyone, particularly other students from the same country, might see them walk into the counseling services building. At times, an international student may refuse to see a counselor from a similar cultural background due to fear of gossip and shame.

Professional Training: The provision mental health services on a campus with international students must include the training of campus health and mental health practitioners to enhance their ability to provide culturally sensitive services to international students. While there has been a growing focus on multicultural standards, many college practitioners may not always be aware of the unique issues faced by international students from numerous countries. Inadequate training may result in both missing significant pathology and attributing normative life crises to psychopathology.

For example, in many collectivistic cultures, very close ties to the family are the norm. Mental health providers who are operating from a Western individualistic model of health may view students from the cultures as being overly dependent on their family members, and, as a result, attempt to develop a treatment plan incorporating interventions that may be inappropriate and cause the international student and their family undue conflict and distress.

Intervening with International Students

Given both the complexity and prevalence of the challenges international students face, conventional student developmental theories that are applicable for most students in the U.S. need to be modified to meaningfully capture international students' development (Pedersen, 1997). In a similar vein, conventional counseling interventions need to be creatively adapted to be appropriate for international students. The following list suggests several culturally sensitive interventions for international students. These suggestions take into account international students' development based on the length of their stay and acculturation level.

Educate, normalize, socialize and empower. International students come from a variety of cultural backgrounds with diverse ways of looking at mental/emotional health. Initially, virtually all must deal with both the cultural shock of being in a new country as well as their new academic challenges. To assist these adjustments, it is important to educate and normalize the challenges they encounter that may potentially interfere with their optimal functioning. It is also useful to provide and encourage positive social interactions during this adjustment period. Finally, no intervention is complete without a strength-based, empowerment framework.

Despite the lack of support from the federal government on international students (Altbach, 2004) and the lack of resources in international programming (Pedersen, 1997), many universities have incorporated various programs to help international students experience a positive social life and connect with both their international and American colleagues. For example, UCLA offers the Welcome Dance, International movie clubs, and conversational group meetings (Lacina, 2002). University of Kansas accommodates thirty diverse student organizations or groups, e.g., The Muslim Association (Lacina, 2002). San Diego State University helps students adjust by mentoring the new international students through an e-mail exchange program, where newly arrived students are matched with student volunteers (Lacina, 2002). UC Davis incorporates many local social activities in the new international students orientation.

As education is "one of the most productive strategies to modify international students' attitude toward psychological problems," it needs to be integrated into students' orientation programs. Different terms were used to describe the complexity of psychological sufferings experienced by international students in their migration experiences, such as "uprooting disorder" (Zwingman, 1978) or "foreign student

syndrome“ (Ward, 1967, in Sandhu, 1994). Foreign student syndrome refers to “the high levels of anxiety related problems but having no recognizable physical signs and symptoms” (Sandhu, 1995, p. 230).

Uprooting disorder signifies “identifiable psychological symptoms of alienation, nostalgia, depression, and sense of helplessness” (p. 230). Not knowing or understanding what they are going through can contribute to the international students suboptimal adjustment. To educate and normalize the students’ experiences, UC Davis International Student & Scholar Services collaborates with Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) to provide a psycho-educational program as part of their new international students orientation. This program explains that the students’ cultural shock experience is both common and normal. It addresses stereotypes of mental health interventions and provides a sample of stress management techniques and other stress-management resources on campus, including CAPS itself.

As part of the education component, workshops to address different adjustment concerns have proven useful. Topical workshops may include: ESL/language workshops, communication workshops with assertiveness training, cross-cultural communication/understanding, and Teaching Assistant/Research Assistant/Graduate Assistant (TA/RA/GA) workshops. As always, these workshops should be conducted with consideration of the cultural differences. For example, many international students fear that assertiveness equals aggressiveness, a trait they do not want to have. Therefore, communication workshops need to clarify such differences as well as examine different ways of being assertive, taking into account cultural differences.

Many international students were raised in educational systems that are vastly different from those in the U.S. These differences present a particular adaptive challenge for those who become TA/RA/GAs in dealing with U.S. students or faculty. As we have noted, many other cultures view professors as authority figures in a way that often interferes with faculty-student or mentor-mentee relationships (e.g., you cannot ask professor questions, and you certainly do not know how to deal with interpersonal conflict with professors). Workshops that help them transcend these barriers and equip them with skills to cope in the U.S. educational systems will begin to relieve their stress and enhance their performance as TA/RA/GAs.

To assist with language concerns, some universities make ESL classes mandatory, especially on the undergraduate level. Integrating online resources in those classes or workshops might be useful.

Another useful resource is Dave's ESL Café, which provides an online discussion board for ESL related topics (Lacina, 2002).

As much as education, and skill-building workshops can empower students, no intervention is complete without helping these international students realize the resilience that they have by virtue of learning a new language, performing in a different educational system, and adjusting in a new environment. Therefore, it is very appropriate to help these students obtain a greater appreciation for their ability to adjust and adapt. For example, many international students who will take the role of TAs in their graduate training will deal with U.S. students who are not used to international students' as TAs. In these situations international students are likely to feel intimidated, reducing their effectiveness as TAs. Helping these international student TAs gain self-confidence by realizing how much they have accomplished with their multiple language skills and their educational accomplishments will enhance their self esteem. They should be encouraged to speak with authority in their TA roles, even if they speak with an accent. (No one ever doubted Henry Kissinger's intelligence or authority)

Think and Help "outside the box." Many international students will manifest their adjustment stress in chronic somatic complaints (Mori, 2000). A more holistic approach (e.g., stress management interventions) may be one way to provide them with a positive exposure to mental health professionals. This is in line with Chung, Nguyen, and Gany's (2002) suggestion that a more holistic (e.g., biopsychosocial, spiritual, etc.) framework of health be used in helping many Asian international students understand their mental health concerns. Misra added that "concrete, tangible help" would enhance the development of international students' trust and alliance with mental health professionals (personal communication, Feb 6, 1997 in Mori, 2000). Additionally, to help reduce the stigma of being seen by mental health professionals, Takeuchi, Mokuau, and Chun (1992) also suggested that mental health professionals be available "within or near such non-psychological services as legal, financial, linguistic, educational, social, and medical assistance." For example, a counselor's availability in the international students offices may help bridge the stigma of having to go to the counseling center.

All-in-one intervention. To further address the adjustment stresses of learning a new culture and identity in a new country, professionally-led support groups can provide a safe space for international students to engage with mental health professionals, with benefits that may go beyond those achievable

with individual counseling. In addition, such support groups can serve as the medium for many positive learning experiences in language skills, social interaction, and academic, personal and professional life. Western Michigan University initiated a women's support group for Asian international students to help enhance their mental health (Carr, Koyama, & Thiagarajan, 2003).

Establishing a supportive network in the U.S. (whether with their international or U.S. peers) is very critical in the successful adjustment of the international student. Group members will feel more comfortable practicing their English, expressing their feelings in English, and learning how to navigate in the new culture (dealing with prejudice, discrimination, immigration, academic/career issues, women's health, family pressures/expectations, friendship/dating, nutrition/food, etc). This type of program has been adopted by many universities. The power of this type of intervention supports the recently understood stress paradigm, "tend and befriend" (vs. fight or flight), as well as substantive research in the health benefits of social contact and social network (Taylor et al, 2000). Carr, Koyama, and Thiagarajan (2003) also recommended "separate groups for men and women because students from many other cultures may feel more at ease in discussing concerns" with others of the same gender. (p. 133).

As for family members, some international students come to the U.S. with a spouse or children, which poses additional stressors. The challenges of having a family in a foreign country away from their former support systems may contribute to significant stress within the family, which in turn can affect the students themselves. Helping students constructively deal with these stresses through couple (family) counseling may significantly help their relationship and other aspects of their lives. Some universities provide support group for spouses, which can be more helpful than individual/couple counseling, especially if they are dealing with adjustment/acclimation stress, vs. pre-existing/inherent problems in the couple/family systems.

Culturally sensitive counseling. Increased evidence that cultural variables play an important role in treatment efficacy has been shown consistently (Quintana & Atkinson, 2002). Paying attention to these variables (e.g., acculturation levels, cultural values, cultural identity development) is not only called for, but ethical. For example, given the acculturation level or the cultural/personal backgrounds of the students, they may prefer "directive vs. non-directive" counseling (Pedersen, 1997, p. 132). Whenever appropriate, it is also helpful to have students frame their struggles as "acculturation stress" vs. "illness" (Chung, Nguyen,

& Gany, 2000). Again, helping students deal with this in the framework of stress management or communication/cultural conflicts may be more acceptable than seeing the concerns as primarily mental health issues. This may translate to the need for students to learn to operate functionally in this new culture by learning a new way of communicating/relating, or balancing stress, or defining “a third culture or own identity” (Pedersen, 1997, p. 135). At times, it helps to have counselors encourage students to use traditional modes of healing that are embedded in their own culture in conjunction with traditional counseling (Chung et al, 2000). This is in line with the accumulative evidence of emic (culture-specific) vs. etic (universal) interventions (Quintana & Atkinson, 2002) to maximize positive outcome in treatment. On the other hand, some international students may respond well to the conventional psychotherapy intervention given their acculturation levels. Hence, is it important to continually assess the different factors of the within group variability. Finally, a strength-based focus on individual counseling is integral. Any good counseling will not only look at one’s weakness, but also one’s strength and resilience.

Mental health professionals’ cross-cultural competency. There is little doubt that therapist factors play an important role in the effectiveness of any psychological interventions. Therefore, therapists’ cross-cultural competency or awareness is increasingly relevant in the delivery of service. Despite the heightened awareness, increased discussion and training in the areas of diversity or multiculturalism, one’s exposure to these topics or training does not necessarily translate to better cross-cultural competency. It is important that both practitioners and scientists in this field continue to practice the universal language of good human interactions (e.g., acceptance, non-judgmental attitude, openness, compassion, sensitivity) and good self-reflective practice to continually assess and reflect on their xenophobia and other biases. In addition, with the globalization and dynamic changes of the new generations of international students coming to the U.S., it is important that practitioners receive continuous discussion and consultation to be able to provide meaningful help. International students have been labeled as “the silent minority” (Sandhu, 1995) for many reasons. It is timely that mental health professionals advocate for these student’s mental health needs and become increasingly sensitive to the complex challenges these international students face.

Research: need assessment and/or program evaluation: To specifically address international students’ mental health needs, more research, need assessment and program evaluation are necessary (Mori, 2000). The majority of international students successfully adapt to their new culture, their new

educational system and gain confidence through newly required knowledge and skills. Research into what help these students to do so is called for. In addition, it is critical to encourage research that examines what interventions work across groups (etic/universal) and those that work with specific cultural groups (emic interventions) (Quintana & Atkinson, 2002).

Conclusion:

As health and mental health practitioners on a university campus, we have an obligation to understand the best interests of all students. Our mission and goal is to help all students attain their academic goals and enhance their understanding of the developmental changes they experience as they make progress to those goals.

This article has described numerous issues that international students encounter and has suggested several interventions that may be useful for campus providers. We hope this paper has helped campus practitioners improve their understanding of these issues and interventions and in turn enhance their ability to provide sensitive, helpful services to international students.