Understanding Stressors of International Students in Higher Education: What College Counselors and Personnel Need to Know

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This paper reviews literature related to the international student population found in universities and colleges in the United States (U.S.). More specifically, adjustment issues, common stressors, and coping strategies of international students are explored. Multicultural counseling issues and the help-seeking behavior of international students are addressed. Methods in which college counselors and personnel can assist international students in achieving a positive experience are also discussed. Finally, suggestions for further research are made.

Multicultural Challenge of College Counselors

College counselors often need to modify traditional counseling theories and techniques to meet the particular needs of individual clients. Traditionally, psychology and counseling theories have included cultural specific assumptions that contain universal definitions of what constitutes normal behavior. They typically favor individualism over the ideals of collectivism (Sadeghi, Fischer, & House, 2003). Counseling strictly from these theoretical frameworks may not be suitable for those clients who do not hold the beliefs and values espoused by these theories. The notion of universality of counseling theories and techniques has been questioned by many. There may be a need to modify these traditional approaches to include culturally inclusive or specific considerations.

While a need for modification of traditional counseling approaches and a mastery of multicultural competencies may exist, mastering the basic premises of traditional counseling competencies may be needed in order to successfully utilize multicultural competencies (Fuertes & Bartolomeo, 2001). With the diversification of the United States (U.S.), college counselors will inevitably be faced with counseling culturally diverse clients. In order to effectively meet the needs of these clients, college counselors need to step out of the traditional role of a counselor.

Becoming competent in multicultural issues, values, and beliefs of diverse clients may aid college counselors when working with a diverse population. Vinson and Nemeyer (2000) suggested an increase in racial identity development may consequently lead to an increase in multicultural counseling competency. Sue and Sue (2003) discussed the notion of what it means to be a culturally competent counselor. These components included possessing awareness of one’s own cultural biases, pursuing knowledge about a client’s culture, and actively seeking out skills and techniques that are culturally sensitive. Competency, according to Pedersen (1987), can also include the avoidance of reductionism in the counseling process. In other words, attempts should be made not to substitute cultural stereotypes for the phenomenological perspective of each client. The pursuit of cultural competency is an active and indefinite one. College counselors who do not challenge, explore, or become aware...
of their own culturally learned assumptions may not be practicing within the principles of suitable counseling (Pedersen, 1990).

The Presence of International Students in Higher Education

It is reported that in the 2003-2004 school year international students made up 4.3% of U.S. higher education enrollment. That is a total of 572,509 international students enrolled in colleges or universities across the United States. This was a slight decline from the following year where the international student population accounted for 4.6% of higher education enrollment, totaling 586,323 international students (Open Doors, 2004). Nonetheless, the presence of international students in U.S. institutions is prevalent. These students bring both cultural diversity and economic advantages to the U.S. Open Doors reported that many colleges and universities are called to meet the needs of and provide for a successful and beneficial experience for these students.

International Students Adapting to a New Culture

Adjustment Issues

When coming to the U.S. to study, many international students are faced with an unfamiliar social and educational culture. Consequently, the adjustment issues and the difficulty international students may face when coming to the U.S. are not surprising. A study by Kaczmarek, Matlcek, Merta, Ames, and Ross (1994) suggested that international students appeared to have a more difficult college transition when compared to that of U.S. students. Additionally, they found that these students appeared to experience difficulty seeking assistance when needed. Zahi (2002) found that the most significant adjustment issues international students faced are related to cultural differences, language challenges, and the U.S. educational system. It was reported that issues which were of little concern to international students were those relating to finances, homesickness, and health issues. This is in contrast to research by Ying and Liese (1994), which found that the level of homesickness was the strongest predictor of poor adjustment. While there is a general consensus by many researchers on the bulk of adjustment issues, there are some discrepancies in the magnitude of each.

Common Sources of Stress

The presence of some type of stress may be an inevitable psychological factor experienced by international students. Language barriers and lack of knowledge of the host culture, and the differences that exist within that culture, are all potential stressors that could be perceived as threatening (Chen, 1999). Language skills may be a significant source of stress because of the effect they can have on the social and academic performance of a student (Chen, 1999; Zahi, 2002). Chen suggested that lack of English language proficiency may limit a student’s desire to seek out social interactions and thus create negative feelings about their ability to be successful in their new environment. Furthermore, language proficiency may be such an important factor that it can affect the self-concept and self-efficacy of an international student’s performance. This can in turn affect their tendency to seek out social interaction within in the new host culture. Thus, they may not gain useful knowledge that may help them successfully adapt to this new culture.

Ways of Reducing Stress

Researchers have found that the quality of relationships international students had with faculty, the perceived quality of instruction, and the presence of faculty interest in the student’s professional development can all act as a protective function to the mental well-being of students undergoing stress (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992). The presence of some type of social support and how it is perceived by the individual appears to provide mental benefits, particularly in times
of stress. Additionally, some international students have indicated that increasing the interaction between international and U.S. students would be helpful (Zahi, 2002). International students in one study reported an increase of positive effects on their levels of distress experienced due to cultural differences when they developed relationships with U.S. students (Kaczmarek et al., 1994). This research could support the idea of mentoring. Not only does it appear that international students could benefit from mentoring programs but U.S. students as well. This can be seen as a reciprocal relationship that could aid in cultural awareness and sensitivity by both international and U.S. students (Zahi, 2002).

Positive Coping Strategies

Much of the research on international students tends to focus heavily on problems they tend to encounter regarding adjustment rather than on what makes an international student's experience in the U.S. a positive one (Tseng & Newton, 2002). While it is certainly important to explore what difficulties these students may experience, it is also of use to identify how they manage to overcome these difficulties. International students in one study reported eight strategies for positive adjustment or maintaining positive well-being: knowing themselves and others, building relationships, expanding their worldview, asking for help, developing cultural and social contacts, establishing relationships with advisors and instructors, English proficiency, and letting go of problems (Tseng & Newton, 2002). Other researchers also found that, in general, the population of international students they surveyed were confident in their abilities, experienced overall satisfaction, and utilized the services available to them on their campuses (Parr et al., 1992; Luzzo, Henao, & Wilson, 1990). Parr et al. suggested that international students, who show signs of positive adjustment, should be encouraged to offer help to other students in need. Ultimately, increased awareness of the strategies and factors that may lead to both positive adjustment and experiences for some international students can help college counselors and personnel develop programs or interventions to aid students in achieving this high level of adjustment.

Implications for College Counselors and Personnel

Multicultural Competency

When working with international students, a multicultural perspective that does not espouse to the idea of cultural universality may be most appropriate (Sue & Sue, 2003). Additionally, college counselors should be mindful of factors such as the psychological, emotional, and academic concerns that have been found to be common among the experiences of this student population (Chen, 1999; Zahi, 2002). A counselor's cultural sensitivity is crucial to the success of the counselor and student interaction due to the heterogeneous nature of this student population (Tatar & Horenczyk, 2000). Furthermore, in order to effectively meet the needs of international students, college counselors may need to analyze their own multicultural competency. College counselors who engage in culturally responsive counseling behaviors may be perceived by clients as possessing increased levels of expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and cultural awareness (Zhang & Dixon, 2001). College counselors may be faced with not only academic and psychological concerns of these students but may need to address the cultural issues that lie within the heterogeneous international student population (Tatar & Horenczyk, 2000).

Be Aware of Help-Seeking Behaviors

In addition to general knowledge of the common concerns of international students, college counselors need to be aware of the students' tendencies toward seeking help when needed. Results from a study by Zahi (2002) regarding the help-seeking behaviors
of international students indicated that they typically prefer to use family and friends as a means of support for personal problems. This may be attributed partly to the lack of understanding of the counseling and student services available on college campuses for international students. Furthermore, the research suggested that these students may not be familiar with the specifics of counseling and for whom it is intended. As a result, some apprehension may be felt in regards to divulging personal information to a stranger, one not of a shared culture. Other research has indicated similar results regarding the likelihood of international students seeking help from college counseling services (Baloglu, 2000). Friends and parents may be the most important support systems to international students and are thus used in lieu of traditional counseling. College counselors must be aware of how individuals from various cultures view the expression of emotions and how they are shared (Komiya & Eells, 2001).

Utilizing Varies Helping Approaches and Methods

Due to the diverse needs of these students, college counseling services should be flexible. Additionally, these services may need to include alternative forms of counseling approaches, such as psycho-educational programs (Komiya & Eells, 2001). Pedersen (1991) suggested that college counselors may need to use less formal methods of counseling such as presentations, discussions, and everyday encounters when working with international students.

These students may not always actively turn to traditional counseling services in times of distress, but they can be helped in many ways by providing a variety of services. Providing individual career and academic counseling may help meet the specific desires expressed by some international students for academic and career planning assistance (Leong & Sedlacek, 1989). Offering psycho-educational and prevention services, establishing mentoring programs, providing referral services, and implementing study and academic enhancement skills groups could all be ways in which college counselors could offer support for these students. Positive rapport may be built by having college counselors interact with students in these alternative formats. As a result, students could be less apprehensive to seek counseling services for mental health related problems when needed.

Making Use of New Student Orientations

New student orientations specifically designed to familiarize international students with the services available may be a way to promote the utilization of these services when needed. Zahi (2002) suggested that college personnel and college counselors design orientation programs so that they specifically address academic and cultural differences. In particular, addressing the cultural differences of the educational structure and expectations of students in the U.S. may be beneficial. Many international students may perceive that significant academic demands are being placed upon them and this can be a source of stress. This perception of the need of academic superiority may be due to a desire to perform at a level that will please the family or because of financial assistance they may receive, potentially requiring specific academic standards (Oropeza, Fitzgibbon, & Baron, 1991). In order to properly address and better equip these students to succeed academically in U.S. institutions, the academic differences that exist should be thoroughly addressed. More specifically, when addressing academic differences, it has been suggested that college personnel address the unique demands of a U.S. classroom. This may include the expectation of class participation, group work, and the requirement of oral presentations (Zahi, 2002), all of which could be a potential source of stress and anxiety.
The Need for Further Research

To effectively ensure a beneficial experience for international students in the U.S., more research needs to be conducted in several areas. Research done on the needs of international students has identified specific needs in the areas of career planning, academic and culture adjustment, and less formal counseling interventions to address emotional and psychological issues (Leong & Sedlacek, 1989; Komiya & Eells, 2001; Pedersen, 1991). While there is research on this topic, the needs of international students should be investigated further. Understanding what needs are of most importance and gaining information on how college counselors and personnel can assist in helping international students meet their particular needs would be of additional research interest (Kaczmarek et al., 1994). Additionally, information gained from this type of research may help colleges and universities in the design process of their international student programs. By proactively addressing the identified common needs of international students, college counselors and personnel can inform these students of the resources available to them. Research has shown that implementing new student orientation programs on college and university campuses may be of particular use to the international student population (Zahi, 2002). More research on the effectiveness of new student orientation sessions is needed (Pedersen, 1991). Some researchers have also noted that there are unique ways in which international students may seek relief during times of distress. Relief may be sought by utilizing their natural support systems, which can include friends and family (Komiya & Eells, 2001; Zahi, 2002). To better serve the international student population, additional research should address their natural support systems and how these may be used in college counseling services (Pedersen, 1991). Of additional interest are the psychological coping mechanisms these students utilize. Most research tends to focus on deficiencies rather than on positive well-being and the strategies employed to maintain this level of well-being (Tseng & Newton, 2002). Identifying the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional strategies these students utilize in adjusting to a new culture in a positive way will provide college counselors and personnel with a better overall understanding of the students they serve. This greater understanding will also provide useful strategies for college counselors and personnel when helping international students adjust to their new learning and living environment.

Overall, the research on international students is quite thorough. A need still exists, however, for additional, more recent research. More research on the international student population as well as how college counselors and personnel can better serve them will help aid in the overall success of both international students and the international student programs that serve them.

References


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