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International Students: An Introduction

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International students represent a population with specialized issues and concerns. Meant as an overview for student affairs practitioners not primarily responsible for international students, this article provides an explanation of culture shock, topics to be covered in international orientation, and the importance of social support systems. Also included are the unique academic issues impacting international students and an explanation of the role of the International Student Advisor and the international advising office in advocating for and counseling foreign students. The paper concludes with suggestions for further research.

International students are playing an increasingly important role on our college campuses. The Institute of International Education cited that in the 1996-97 school year, 457,984 international students came to the United States to study with a 0.9% increase in foreign student enrollment in 1997 (Open Doors, 1997). Nearly 60% of today's international students come from Asia, with Japan, China, the Republic of Korea, India, and Taiwan leading the world in the number of students in the United States. Canada sends the largest number of students from Western nations, (Open Doors, 1997) and enrollment from eastern and western Europe and from the Commonwealth of Independent States (the former USSR) is also increasing (Desruisseaux, 1994). While 67.2% of international student funding continues to be from personal or family resources (Open Doors, 1997), it is becoming more common for the student to be from a developing nation and sponsored by the home government, home university, or some other agency (Locke & Velasco, 1987).

Although the term foreign has negative connotations, it is still largely used in the literature, and the terms foreign and international will be used interchangeably throughout this text. The terms host national and American will also be used interchangeably, although it is important to note that there are a million students in the world not currently studying in their own countries, and the research represents all international students regardless of the host country. This article will discuss the importance of international students on American campuses. An operational definition of culture shock, the first major obstacle confronting international students, will be presented next. Important components to the adaptation of international students will also be discussed, including orientation, social support systems, academic issues and advising, and the role of the International Student Advisor and International Student and Scholar Offices.

The complexity of international student adjustment is often greatly misunderstood by the general public, but Furnham & Trezise (1983) explain that the problems of international students are basically three-fold. First, there are the stresses that confront anyone living in a foreign culture such as racial discrimination, language problems, accommodation difficulties, separation reactions, di-

etary restrictions, financial stress, misunderstandings and loneliness. Second, there are the developmental difficulties that face all late adolescents and young people whether they are studying abroad or not. This is typically a time of considerable vulnerability when the young person attempts to become emotionally independent and autonomous and a responsible member of society. Third, there are academic stresses where students are expected to work very hard with complex and perhaps alien material. Pedersen (1991) states that problems encountered by foreign students are not so different from problems confronted by students in general, and the fact that they are foreign nationals should not be allowed to obscure the identity crises they share with all other students in American universities. While these points are valid, the special needs of international students indicate they may represent a group at risk for academic failure or emotional problems in a university setting.

It is clear that international students represent a special population in the university community, but if their needs are adequately met there are many benefits to having international students on our campuses. Research has revealed that foreign students spend large sums of money in housing and essential purchases which contributes to the financial well being of the colleges and universities they attend and to the communities in which they live (Rogers, 1984). Furthermore, foreign students studying in the U.S. do not have access to federal grants or loans, and are often not eligible to receive scholarships, even in private universities (Neuberger, 1992). Therefore, they represent a source of sizable income for the university that has a flourishing international student body.

Aside from financial gain there are other reasons to actively recruit international students. Institutions of higher education are currently involved in an effort to "internationalize" and make their campuses "multicultural," which would include ethnic American groups as well as foreign nationals. Having international students on the campus who are involved in the university community furthers this educational goal and trickles down through every aspect of university life. For example, international students provide a unique opportunity to impart classroom discussions with an alternative viewpoint, especially in areas such as political science, history, business, and communications (Willer, 1992). The presence of international students in residence halls and classrooms provides American students with a unique opportunity for personal growth. Sharma & Jung (1985) postulated that U.S. students who have a higher level of interaction with international students were generally less prejudiced against people of other nations, less antagonistic toward racial and ethnic groups, more enthusiastic about liberal and social views, and more sympathetic towards persons in unfortunate circumstances. Many of the international students enrolled in U.S. universities represent the best and brightest students in their host country (Constantinides, 1992). Some of these students may become future leaders in government, industry, technology, business and education (Locke & Velasco, 1987). The experience they have in the United States while pursuing their educational goals may have a significant impact on future relations between the United States and the countries

these students represent (Pedersen, 1991). Although each of these goals may result from intercultural contact, Amir (1969) found that they usually occur only under carefully structured conditions, and it is important for colleges and student affairs professionals to implement these supportive conditions.

Culture Shock

International students must quickly learn a wide range of unfamiliar and culturally defined roles under conditions of considerable stress (Pedersen, 1991). This is a good way of describing the phenomenon of culture shock, an experience that affects all sojourners to some extent. Culture shock, both in severity and resolution, is greatly affected by several factors: the reasons they left their home culture (Dyal & Dyal, 1981), how similar the host culture is to their own culture, and the personal maturity and adaptability of the student (Church, 1982). Culture shock is precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing familiar symbols of social intercourse such as customs, gestures, facial expressions, or words (Oberg, 1960). Usually culture shock is viewed as a normal process of adaptation to cultural stress involving such symptoms as anxiety, helplessness, irritability, and a longing for a more predictable and gratifying environment (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963; Oberg). Research has shown that there are several stages of cultural adjustment which follow a U curve.

The U curve hypothesis indicates that cultural adjustment follows a pattern shaped like the letter U. The U curve depicts the initial optimism and elation in the host culture, called the "honeymoon period" where everything encountered in the new culture is exciting and new. This stage can last anywhere from a few days to six months, depending on how soon everyday coping and communication with the new culture must begin (Oberg, 1960). This is followed by a dip in the level of adjustment, which is characterized by hostile, emotional, and stereotypical attitudes toward the host country and increased association with fellow sojourners and people from their home culture. This stage can last anywhere from 6-18 months or more. After this stage in adjustment is worked through, there is a gradual recovery to higher adjustment levels where the sojourner gains increased language skills and has a greater ability to operate in the new culture. Gullahorn & Gullahorn (1963) proposed a W curve hypothesis, indicating that sojourners often undergo a reacculturation process (a second U curve in their home environments similar to that experienced abroad). While reacculturation, or reverse culture shock, is a very real and in some ways a more debilitating experience, further discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.

Church (1982) summarized that support for the U curve hypothesis must be considered weak, inconclusive and overgeneralized. Church notes that although the U curve description of adjustment implies a within-individual longitudinal adjustment process, almost all of the data on which these descriptions are based are cross-sectional. While there is little scientific evidence supporting the U curve, it is a simple explanation for a complex and highly individualized process. This assists students in understanding the adjustment difficulties they may be experi-

encing. International students are often relieved to discover that other students are going through the same process, and that they are normal and by no means weak or unstable.

Orientation

Orientation is often an introduction not only to the institution and the American education system but to the American culture itself. Due to the special needs of the international student, it is often impossible or impractical to include them in the regular freshman orientation for American students. Therefore, it is advisable to have a separate orientation for incoming international students. According to some orientation handbooks such as AMIDEAST's (1983) *An Introduction to Living and Studying in the U.S.*, government regulations such as procedures at the port of entry, immigration regulations, driving regulations, and what to do in an emergency should all be topics included in an orientation program for international students. Most institutions now require mandatory insurance for international students, necessitating a discussion of insurance coverage and filing procedures. Housing, food, leisure, U.S. social customs, travel in the U.S., communications, money, climate, and necessary clothing are also suggested topics for discussion in either the on-campus orientation or in pre-departure orientation materials. It is advisable that international students be allowed to participate in the parts of the freshman orientation that they may wish to attend, however, for it can be an important first step towards making social contacts.

Orientation is a hectic time for the International Student Advisor. Problems at the port of entry, students arriving with immediate concerns as basic as bedding and English proficiency and placement testing can all occupy the advisor at a time when their personal attention is crucial to the incoming student. Having a staff of student orientation leaders consisting of both upperclass international and host national students can be invaluable to the new students, as well as help relieve pressure on the advisor. These orientation assistants often serve as the new student's first chance to make contact with peers, and this contact can help provide a smooth transition. International students often arrive as much as a full week before other incoming students, at a time when resident assistants are occupied with training, and the halls are virtually empty. This can be a shockingly lonely time for the new international student, thus increasing the importance of these student leaders.

Social Support Systems

In informal and formal needs assessments, international students repeatedly expressed a desire for interaction with American students (Liddell, 1990). "The number, variety, and depth of social encounters with host nationals may be the most important yet complex variables related to sojourner adjustment" (Church, 1982, p. 551). In a number of studies on bicultural adjustment, social concern has been identified as one of the biggest issues facing international students (Pedersen 1991). Furnham & Alibhai (1985) noted that social systems buffer stress by pro-

viding the individual with emotional support and guidance.

There are many barriers the international student faces regarding social situations. The first and most obvious barrier is language. Many international students have limited experience in speaking English, especially in a conversational setting. Regional accents, slang, and pace of speaking will impact understanding (Althen, 1983). Social interaction with host nationals is inhibited by status differentials, ethnocentric attitudes, evaluative or judgmental perceptions, different definitions and norms for friendships, and the high level of anxiety and threat to self-esteem frequently associated with intercultural encounters (Church, 1982). With the aforementioned barriers to social interaction, it is not uncommon for the international services office to insulate the foreign student from stress-inducing social encounters (Thielen & Limbird, 1992). This practice, while intended to help the student, could actually have the adverse affect of hindering the development of skills necessary for positive integration with the university community (Thielen & Limbird). Therefore, the international advising center's intervention in reducing barriers and encouraging social interaction is crucial. Attempts should be made to provide international students with a variety of programs and possibilities for establishing a social network that meets the needs of the individual student.

The nature of the residence hall has also been found to have significant importance (Neuberger, 1992). An international theme hall, where host nationals request to live with a foreign student can provide the international student with an opportunity to make strong bonds with other international students and U.S. students. The roommate relationship is dependent on several factors. One factor is the willingness of the host national to live with an international student. Other factors include the ideas of the international student and the American student regarding what makes a "good roommate." American students, when asked to list qualities that make a good roommate, tended to focus on "a desire for closeness, emotional support, and doing activities together outside of their room" (Saidla & Grant, 1993, p. 339). International students rarely mentioned qualities of the personal relationship, but focused instead on lifestyle issues such as privacy, respect for territory, and neatness (Saidla & Grant). The roommate relationship between international students and American students is not inherently dysfunctional; structured programs and activities with an international emphasis can make this relationship very successful. International residence halls usually provide programming designed to assist with both the cultural adjustment of the international student and with the inter-cultural training of the American student. Many times international students themselves are resident assistants in international theme halls, which can provide valuable and accessible counseling in the form of peer advising as well as an important leadership opportunity for the foreign student staff member. "For both international and American students, the lasting benefit of participation in such an arrangement (an international theme hall) may be deep and abiding interpersonal relationships that are developed during the college years" (Saidla & Grant, p. 339). There is some criticism of inter-

national theme halls, with a fear of creating an "international ghetto" at the top of the list (Neuberger, 1992). This effect can be controlled by assuring that U.S. students in the hall outnumber international students. Another concern is that this arrangement may allow the international student to remain in his or her comfort zone, living unchallenged by and protected from differing values and levels of acceptance (Grimm, 1993; Neuberger).

Peer advising can also be a way of increasing leadership opportunities for international students while providing another layer of social support for new international students. Peer advisors can be successful international students, or internationally minded American students, especially if they have studied abroad and can empathize with the problems associated with coming to a new culture. The insights that peer advisors can offer about American culture, study habits that have worked for them, getting involved with the campus and so forth can provide a non-threatening environment to discuss what they may be uncomfortable discussing with someone of authority such as an international student advisor.

The language barrier was cited as being one of the most important reasons international students are uncomfortable in social situations (Bink, 1994). Setting up coffee hours with host national and international students can provide international students a structured, yet informal, chance to practice conversational skills. Another possibility is providing international students with volunteer American language "partners" who meet on a regular basis for simple conversation. Retention rates in this kind of program are often dependent upon the host national, so adequate training of the host national is suggested.

Finally, institutions that have a large percentage of international students usually have international student clubs, nationality clubs (clubs representing a certain population, such as the Turkish club or Asian students club), and for the more comfortable student, professional and American social clubs such as fraternities and sororities. Typically international student clubs provide the international student with the camaraderie of cohorts that are experiencing or have experienced similar situations. Often American students are invited to join these international and national clubs, thus providing another avenue for interaction with host nationals.

It is important to note that while many international students express a desire for increased social interaction with the campus community, there are justifiable reasons students may want to limit their interaction with the larger campus society. An example are Chinese students, who may fear they will be influenced by values and beliefs that are not accepted in their home country, especially after the crushing blow to democratization that was dealt in Tiananmen Square (Thielen & Limbird, 1992). Student affairs professionals with responsibilities for international students must recognize and respect the delicate issues that may impact the level of cross-cultural interaction a student chooses to have, while providing multi-layered opportunities for whatever the level of desired integration.

Academic Issues and Advising

The responsibility for academic advising falls not only with the advisor in the academic department but also with the foreign student advisor. In order to maintain an F-1 or J-1 (student) visa, the student must be making satisfactory progress toward the completion of a degree and be enrolled in at least 12 credit hours for undergraduates and eight hours for graduate students. Therefore, the international advisor has to be consulted before changes to the schedule can be made, especially before a student drops below full time enrollment. In schools that have an early alert system to spot academic trouble, the international student advisor is often called upon to participate in academic advising.

Several academic problems that international students encounter are different from the problems of American students. The first and most basic problem is English language proficiency. Every international student must take the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) in order to be admitted to a U.S. institution. The TOEFL measures listening comprehension, reading comprehension, and grammar. However, as with other standardized tests like the SAT or GRE, the TOEFL can be practiced and certain test taking techniques learned. Therefore, the TOEFL may not be a realistic measure of English language skills. Many students who pass the TOEFL still have difficulty speaking in a conversational setting, keeping up with assigned readings, and in writing ability. Essay tests and research papers may be the academic downfall of an international student if they are not adequately prepared. Writing proficiency tests must be included in placement examinations for international students to detect any need for further English as a Second Language (ESL) courses or remedial writing courses.

Related to English language skills are placement testing and accreditation. Secondary education varies drastically from one country to another, which provides a problem for some registrar and admissions offices. Students may sometimes be placed in classes that they are too advanced for, or in some instances, classes for which they do not meet the proper prerequisites. Registrars and admissions officials must be educated in the world's education systems in order to help with the credentialing of academic certificates, class placement, and transfer of credit from the home institution.

Other academic problems can include a lack of information about the host institution's educational system. International students "must become acclimated to the unfamiliar U.S. academic system, which means that in addition to mastering course material, they may have to become familiar with a new grading system and the differences between units and credits, semesters and trimesters" (Boyer & Sedlacek, 1988, p. 218). Credit given for discussing material in class, (where in their home country the classroom format may be entirely lecture oriented with discussion discouraged), numerous multiple-choice examinations (Boyer & Sedlacek, 1988), and a wide cultural variance on issues of academic honesty are major issues facing the international student (Coleman & Carsky, 1994). The purpose and philosophy of education differs widely across cultures. In many cultures, the process of learning involves memorization of course content. Original

thought is discouraged, as a mere student cannot at this point taint the "truth" offered by scholars and professors (Constantinides, 1992). U.S. academic expectations of paraphrasing and summarizing would modify this truth, so it is not uncommon to have international students produce word for word an academic text (Constantinides, 1992). While this is expected practice in many countries, this constitutes plagiarism in the United States' educational systems. Philosophies concerning cooperative learning and competition also vary greatly from country to country (Constantinides, 1992). What would be considered the honorable practice of assuring the achievement of all through collaborative efforts in the home country would be considered cheating in the United States. This presents an area of concern for faculty and campus judicial systems. While international students should certainly not be given special treatment, it would be wise for institutions to address these cultural differences. Constantinides (1992) offers two suggestions to judicial officers. One is to create a sanction for first time international offenders that would consist of a class teaching appropriate levels of cooperation and citation at U.S. institutions. This would allow the university to further educate the student without destroying his or her academic career. Another option would be to present this class as part of the orientation program as a proactive method of intervention.

Academic problems resulting from cultural adjustment can also occur. "Normal functioning is not often possible in the early stages of adaptation; consequently, faulty decisions and bad judgments can be the result. The negative effects of faulty decision-making can be costly in terms of time spent re-enrolling, or re-taking programs" (Westwood & Barker, 1990, p. 253). Schram & Lauver (1988) also point out that academic success may be hindered by inadequate or slow adjustment to the university setting. Problems that occur during the student's adjustment period may leave a poor impression on faculty members (Westwood & Barker), or result in the student getting hopelessly behind. In this respect, it is important that faculty members be educated about the particular problems international students may have in their studies, and become familiar with patterns of adjustment in international students.

Social contact with host nationals is tied to academic success. Boyer & Sedlacek (1988) found that for international students, self-confidence and availability of a strong support person consistently predicted GPA across the eight semesters they examined. Boyer & Sedlacek also found persistence in international student's academic endeavors to be related to their adjustment to the system or the external environment as well as their level of self-confidence and the availability of a strong support person. Westwood & Barker (1990) concluded in their study that contact with certain host national individuals is "positively correlated with academic success and lowered probability of dropping out of academic programs" (p. 260).

Dealing with culture shock; planning orientation and programs designed to foster social contacts with host nationals; acting as a resource for faculty, registrars, and admission advisors; and training faculty and staff in intercultural

communication are all responsibilities of the International Student Advisor. This requires a vast knowledge base of cultural adjustment theories, the institutional culture, and superb administrative skills.

The International Student Advisor and Advising Office

The international student advisor wears many hats including immigration official, tax and insurance expert, bookkeeper, community resource, crisis manager, friend, counselor, and even disciplinarian. Foreign Student Advisors (FSAs) must be able to work with several factions who may sometimes have opposing interests. They are a link between the students, the faculty, administrators, other student affairs professionals, the community, and the U.S. government. The FSA must be able to balance the concerns and needs of these groups, and must have the knowledge necessary to mediate between them. FSAs must also be culturally sensitive, and able to tolerate ambiguous situations in which the real problem may not be readily apparent. "The International Student Services Office can easily be characterized as a miniature student affairs division, at least at colleges or universities enrolling several hundreds of international students from different countries" (McIntire, 1992, p. xv).

It is sometimes difficult for the FSA to enter into a counseling relationship with international students. The reasons for this are complex, however one major factor is that FSAs are often seen as an enforcer rather than as an advocate, or an agent of the government rather than an educator (Levitov, 1992). Another important obstacle in helping international students in counseling situations is debunking the belief that interpersonal counseling is only for "sick" people. International students "are generally reluctant to initiate a counseling relationship" (Boyer & Sedlacek, 1989, p. 404). This may be due to cultural differences in attitudes toward counseling, or to "a lack of information about counseling centers, lack of awareness of the usefulness of counseling services, and a suspicion of the entire counseling process" (Locke & Velasco, 1987, p. 117). This requires the FSA to provide outreach programs for their students not only to increase knowledge of the counseling services available to international students, but also to demystify the counseling process.

Counseling across cultures requires a need for "cultural self-awareness and sensitivity, an awareness of assumptions or values, openness to and respect for differing value systems, tolerance for ambiguity, willingness to learn with and from clients, and a genuine concern for people with differing values" (Pedersen, 1991, p. 15). Althen (1991) suggests that "cultures underlie not only value systems but customary means of communicating as well" (p. 63). He has learned to adapt his communication style to his knowledge of the culture he is working with, such as speaking "very softly with Malays, and (usually) loudly with Nigerians" and speaking "indirectly with Japanese, not openly confronting them with objections or disagreements" (p. 63). Important also is the knowledge of group constructs both in our own culture and those abroad. However, one must avoid the danger of treating the international student as a 'nationality' and not as an

individual. Important also is the FSAs ability to realize their limitations in counseling. Most FSAs are not trained counselors, and will need to rely on campus counseling centers for referral. It is, of course, desirable that someone at the counseling center is trained and experienced in cross-cultural counseling.

Suggestions for Research

The lack of grounded theory has been a major factor inhibiting research about international students (Church, 1982; Pedersen, 1991) and affects our ability to counsel them. Many traditional student development theories may not apply to foreign students. Even theories that have focused on U.S. minority student development have not always been applied in meaningful ways and Pedersen urges that it is necessary either to modify theories now in use or develop new theories. Efforts must be made by psychologists, student development theorists, and educators to increase both the volume and the substance of research regarding this population. While the numbers of international students in this country are steadily increasing, the research has shown only marginal growth. There is lack of research on social encounters. For instance, while some researchers have shown that social interaction between internationals and host-nationals is important, there have been few studies conducted on different methods designed to increase the quality of these interactions. There is also a lack of solid information regarding the academic progress of international students. For example, how students adjust to the academic stresses of college in the United States; how they approach such issues as academic honesty when there are vastly different cultural approaches to what American society calls "cheating"; how professors can reach out to international students to improve their communication skills in the classroom and encourage their involvement in academia outside of the classroom. These are all issues that should be researched to a greater extent.

A theory of international student adjustment must be developed to help train today's student affairs professionals. Currently many institutions offering College Student Personnel programs do not offer a separate component dealing specifically with international student development. When issues affecting international students are discussed they are often in conjunction with U.S. minority issues. Although the two populations deal with some of the same issues such as racism, identity problems, and issues of self-confidence, it is premature to assign minority student development theories to international students without further research. International student advisors, lacking a concrete theory of adjustment and development, must supplement their education with coursework in higher education, international and comparative education, law, business, and cross-cultural communication as well as familiarizing themselves with research on this population.

Conclusion

International students have proven to be a special population in the colleges and universities of the United States and the rest of the world. The opportu-

nity for success is great, and the impact they can make on the campus both academically and socially is a sound return on the university's investment in these students. It is therefore important to do everything possible to make sure these students live up to their potential. Through innovative programming; thorough orientation; training of faculty, staff, and students in cross-cultural communication; and educating international students about resources and services available, it is possible to provide the support necessary to help international students both adapt to the host country and the university.

"As the world shrinks, borders are opened, and nations become more interdependent even as they gain individual independence, students must not only be internationally aware, they must be knowledgeable of issues beyond their cities, countries, and continents" (Neuberger, 1992, p. 116). Student affairs practitioners must realize that while international students represent a specialized clientele with their own advising office, that all student affairs professionals have a responsibility toward this group of students. "While such assignment (of specialized student affairs professionals) has come in part as a positive recognition of the special and unique needs of international students, it also, all too often, has meant that other aspects of student services have not been encouraged to respond to international students as their own clientele" (Willer, 1992, p. 164). Student affairs practitioners that are not immediately responsible for international students that become further educated about this population will not only help individual foreign students complete their education in the United States, but will influence in some way the global attitudes toward people of different races, religions, and nationalities.

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