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Abstract: Provides an overview of sociodemographic characteristics of international students and common stressors Asian international students experience in the United States. Significance of the study to develop needed culturally sensitive programs and services; Programs offered to help campuses serve international students more effectively; Benefits given to international students.

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ASIAN INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' ADJUSTMENT: ISSUES AND PROGRAM SUGGESTIONS

According to the Institute of International Education (IIE), there were 452,635 international students in the United States during the 1994-1995 academic year. Of these, approximately 50% came from South and East Asia. How can we best provide culturally sensitive campus and community programs and services to help Asian international students adapt and achieve academic success? Programs for Asian international students must be provided within a context of cultural sensitivity and understanding. This paper will provide an overview of socio-demographic characteristics of international students and common stressors Asian international students often experience in the United States, which can be used to help develop needed culturally sensitive programs and services. This paper will also offer examples and programming suggestions to help collaborative efforts among the campus and local community serve international students more effectively throughout their Pre-arrival, Initial, On-Going, and Return-Home adjustment stages.

Introduction

According to the Institute of International Education, there were more than 450,000 international students in the U.S. during the 1994-1995 academic year. According to Paige (1990), international students are defined as individuals who temporarily reside in a country other than their country of citizenship in order to participate in international educational exchange as students. As the number of international students entering American colleges and universities increase, the need to understand and to address their cultural and psychological adjustment to this country becomes more important. In order to provide culturally appropriate services, university personnels must be sensitive as well as knowledgeable about the group being served. This paper will discuss the issues relevant to working with international Asian students. An overview of the demographic characteristics of international students in the United States is presented. Cultural considerations in working with Asian international students, including the importance of recognizing the diversity among Asian international students is discussed. Program suggestions for working with Asian international students are set forth.

Background

This section will provide an overview of socio-demographic characteristics of international students and common stressors Asian international students often experience in the United States.

Japan has overtaken China as the leading country for international students studying in the U.S. During 1994-95, students from Japan (10%) were the largest subgroup of international students, followed by China (8.7%), Taiwan (8.0%), Republic of Korea (7.4%), India (7.4%), Canada (5.0%), Malaysia (3.0%), and Hong Kong (2.9%) (Institute of International Education, 1995.) Among all international students in the United States, approximately 50% come from South and East Asia. Although Business/Management (20.2%) and Engineering (16.1%) were the most common academic fields of study among international students, enrollment in education and liberal arts studies have increased in the

past year. A small percentage (8.7%) of students came for practical training, nondegree and intensive English programs.

In general, most international students are male and 80% are single. The majority of international students are self-financed with 65% of them paying for their education with personal or family funds.

International students face common as well as their own unique problems. They face the same problems that confront anybody living in a foreign culture, such as racial discrimination, language problems, accommodation difficulties, dietary restrictions, financial stress, misunderstandings and loneliness. Exposure to an unfamiliar environment can create anxiety, confusion and depression. These conditions can lead to complaints of nervousness, loneliness, insomnia and physical illness, all of which appear to interfere with their studies, friendships and so on.

Many international students who come to the U.S. find it very difficult to adjust to the English language and the educational system. Academic difficulties are positively correlated with adjustment. Students may have difficulty adjusting to the various accents of the instructors along with their different teaching styles. They may have difficulty understanding class lectures, making them feel reluctant to participate in class discussions. Moreover, students find the test constructions difficult to comprehend. Those who have English as a second language often require extra time to read their text books. Further, they are often unable to articulate their knowledge on essay exams or research papers due to their limited vocabulary. For many Asian international students poor English is a major stressor and can create significant problems and barriers when trying to function and succeed in the United States.

International students are also hired as teaching assistants at the university level. Students enrolled in their classes may complain about their foreign accents. If the accent is very strong or the teaching assistant's command of the English

language is not very proficient, there will be miscommunication and less comprehension. Foreign teaching assistants may encounter other barriers in teaching such as lack of understanding of the American educational system. They may be unfamiliar with the testing and grading system of the university. Also, they may feel alienated because they do not understand the academic norms or the undergraduate culture. Also, American students who are seeking teaching positions may feel some resentment when the positions are awarded to the foreign student with less experience. As a result of this complaint, several state legislatures have passed laws mandating U.S. higher education institutions to test foreign teaching assistants for English competency.

Financial pressures are great among international students. International students must assume a full-time student status while they are enrolled in school. They are legally prevented from assuming a part-time status or from dropping out. Otherwise, they would have to forfeit their student visas. International students have little or no access to welfare benefits, loans and scholarships, and have the awesome responsibility of paying out of state tuition.

Psychosocial stressors such as academic demands, changes in their support system, and lack of familiarity with U.S. customs and culture, may lead to social isolation among international students. Long school hours can create relationship difficulties if their significant others also have limited English skills. Another important factor that leads to social isolation is homesickness. They often feel homesick for their ethnic cuisine. They may also daydream of memories back home and think about what loved ones are doing back home at that particular hour. Due to the fear of being unable to succeed or perform, many international students develop performance anxiety and depression, but their problems are often manifested as psychosomatic complaints such as sleep disturbances, eating problems, fatigue, stomach ache, or headache. These students will often seek medical help for their physical complaints, but in reality, their problems may stem from psychological stressors. Many Asian students have complaints such

as lack of motivation, laziness, bad study habits or attitudes, inability to concentrate, loss of interest or desire to do anything, low self-esteem, irritability and anger, all of which could be symptoms of depression. These students often seek help in the academic context. Asian students tend to somatize their problems or seek academic help so as to avoid losing face.

International students from Asian countries are often stereotyped as quiet, reserved and non-assertive. These cultures place an emphasis on harmony and respect for authorities. Therefore, many of them are reluctant to share their feelings or emotions, express their opinions or oppositions to anyone, especially to authority figures. Thus instead of emphasizing personal rights and assertive communication, Asians tend to emphasize the importance of patience, harmony, respect and deference. Asian cultures tend to place a high value on team efforts or collectivity whereas Western culture tends to emphasize individualism. Asians are also modest about their accomplishments. Many Asian international students feel uncomfortable with the individualism and the competitiveness associated with the American culture.

Oftentimes, Asian international students struggle between the balance of acculturation and maintaining their own culture. The process of acculturation and adjustment can be stressful. The differences between the two cultures can cause a student to experience significant intrapersonal and interpersonal problems and conflicts. Educating students about the differences between Asian and Western cultures is often very helpful. In order to minimize return-home adjustment shock, they must find balance between the two cultures.

Many Asian international students experience the following: pressure from academic demands, language barriers, financial concerns, performance anxiety, depression, loneliness, homesickness, relationship problems, nonassertiveness, individualism and bicultural conflicts, stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination and paranoia. They often worry about social and political situations in their home

country. In addition, they are concerned about the well-being of their families. Also they worry about securing employment upon graduation. Finally, they may have anxieties about readjustment if they are planning to return to their country.

Program Suggestions

This section offers ways to facilitate international Asian students' adjustment to their new environment including culturally sensitive proactive programming. Culturally sensitive programming collaborating the efforts among the campus and local community could address international students' common concerns more effectively during their four adjustment stages (defined by authors): Pre-Arrival Adjustment Stage, Initial Adjustment Stage, On-Going Adjustment Stage, and Return-Home Adjustment Stage.

Pre-Arrival Adjustment Stage starts before students' arrival to the U.S. The main goal is to prepare the necessary information before students arrival to reduce their anxiety and possible cultural shock. Information about the adjustment process, the U.S. culture, the geographic environment, the U.S. education system, financial requirements, and housing information should be sent out to all prospective students. Alumni or students visiting home are encouraged to hold a workshop for prospective students.

The Initial Adjustment Stage starts with students' arrival and lasts for six months. The main goal is to continue orienting students and reducing cultural shock. Activities such as picking up students in the airport, assisting students with moving in or finding housing, helping orient to the community (e.g., food shopping, transportation system) and holding a welcoming gathering to network with other new arrivals could help reducing the stress from the transition. Orientation programs at this stage need to emphasize the U.S. culture, language and university adjustment. During this stage, students should be informed about the U.S. cultures and traditions, stress management, sexual and racial harassment, financial planning resources, banking system, health care system,

counseling services, university rules and regulations. Further, assisting students with finding networking opportunities (e.g., on and off campus organizations), mentors, and conversation partners could help with their transitions.

The On-going Adjustment Stage starts after the sixth month and lasts until their graduation. The main goal is to help international students with bi-cultural conflicts to achieve a balance between participating in the new culture and maintaining their own cultural identities. The programs emphasize the importance for the student to belong to social networks. It is important to network with other students from same country since they provide a setting where ethnic and cultural values can be rehearsed and expressed. This type of network can help students maintain their culture of origin. It is also important to network with domestic students. This type of bi-cultural network consists of bonds between international students and significant host nationals such as academics, students, and college officials. The main function of the bicultural network is to instrumentally facilitate the academic aspirations of the students. International students also need to have a network of friends and acquaintances for companionship for recreational, and non-task oriented activities. These networks are important because through them students can learn the social skills of their culture of sojourn. Specialized programs offer opportunities for Asian international students to practice their English while exchanging cultural information with native English speakers. Since students are often worried about finding jobs after graduation, this stage also helps students with resume writing and job hunting strategies.

Return-Home Adjustment Stage starts upon graduation and lasts for six month after returning home. The main goal is to help students to anticipate the return home readjustment process, prepare for employment opportunities and reduce return home anxiety. Table 1 summarizes goals and suggested activities for each stage.

To conclude, this paper offered examples of programs to help campuses serve international students more effectively throughout their four stages of adjustment process. Proactive intervention programs highlight that cultural and language adjustment have been successful in encouraging students to find a balance between participating in the new culture and maintaining their cultural identities. These programs could help Asian international students be more successful academically and increase satisfaction with their scholastic stay in the United States.

Table 1

The following chart reads as follows:

Row 1: Stage

Row 2: Goals

Row 3: Suggested Program Activities

Pre-Arrival Adjustment (Before) arrival to the U.S.)

To prepare the necessary information before the student's arrival to the U.S.

To reduce the anxiety level and to prevent or reduce the possibility of culture shock.

Send literature about adjustment process, the U.S. culture, the geographic environment, the U.S. educational system, financial requirements, and housing information.

Hold question-answer sessions by alumni or students currently visiting home.

Initial Adjustment (Arrival-first 6 months)

To continue orienting students about U.S. culture, thus reducing culture shock

Pick up students at the airport, assist students with moving in or finding housing.

Help students orient to the community.

Hold a welcoming gathering to network with other new arrivals.

Hold workshops on the following areas:

- U.S. cultures and tradition
- stress management
- sexual and racial harassment
- financial planning resources
- banking systems
- health care system
- counseling services
- university rules and regulations
- on and off campus organizations

Assist students in finding mentors, English conversation partners.

On-Going Adjustment (After the first 6 months graduation)

To help students with bicultural conflicts

To achieve a balance between participating in the new culture and maintaining their own cultural identity

To prepare for job placement

Provide on-going workshops on the following topics:

-- cultural diversity

-- stress management

-- time management

Provide opportunities such as support or social groups for interacting with other international and domestic students.

Encourage students to keep up with the situation back home (e.g, newspapers from/about home), and join student organizations associated with home country.

Offer self-help materials, information and referral services through telephone, on-line services, radio, newsletters, and newspaper columns.

Offer workshops on resume writing and job hunting strategies.

Return-Home Adjustment (Upon graduation-first 6 months after returning home)

To help students reduce return home anxiety

To help students with job placement

Provide workshops on return home adjustment process.

Provide opportunities to network with alumni and increase job placements.

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