

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS: Their Challenges and Opportunities

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International students are “non-immigrant” visitors to the United States who temporarily take classes and complete part of their education (University of California, Berkeley, n.d.). There were over 1.2 million active international students in 2021, a decrease of 1.2% from the prior year (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2022). Even though international students are considered a minority group, they represented about 4.6% of the student population in the United States in 2020–2021 (Stewart-Rozema & Pratts, 2022). Therefore, it is important to consider international students’ struggles and provide them with resources. As international students leave their home countries, families, and support systems behind, this is one of the major life transitions that they experience as a group.

Major life transitions can significantly impact a person’s mental health and increase their risk of developing psychiatric disorders and other medical conditions (Salleh, 2008). Some of the challenges that international students may face are culture shock, transition anxiety, and loneliness. Furthermore, international students experience academic anxiety in addition to the typical difficulties that all students in higher education experience (Khoshlessan & El-Houbi, 2015). A research study by Saylag (2014) showed that foreign students manifested significantly higher degrees of stress than did the local students. According to a Cornell Chronicle report from 2006, 13 out of the 21 international student suicide victims between 1996 and 2006 were Asian or Asian American (Ramanujan, 2006). The pressure to live up to high expectations of

parents was one of the factors contributing to a high suicide rate among Asian or Asian American students. In addition to the unique pressures they experience, approaching mental health professionals carries a stigma for this group of students. Although most schools have developed counseling services for students, there are no known established clinical standards that are used with this population on college campuses (Choi et al., 2020).

Higher education institutions backed up their proposals of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) policies with data gathered from results of social psychology research in diversity. DEI policies are created to address the needs of minorities, including international students. However, according to Hurd and Plaut (2018), DEI policies also seem to benefit students in general and more privileged groups by enriching their education. Their research demonstrated the advantages that diversity education offers for Whites. This diversity education model, designed for privileged Whites, was then generalized to everyone. According to Hurd and Plaut (2018), diversity entitlement occurs when diversity education and DEI policies have the purpose of enriching White, privileged majority students’ experiences, disregarding the needs of minority students. Furthermore, education on diversity and multiculturalism can have a negative impact on minority students, who appear to benefit more from in-group interactions (Hurd & Plaut, 2018).

RESPONDING TO THE NEEDS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Considering the challenges faced by international students, studies have focused on developing recommendations for international students, authority figures, and institutions, such as faculty members, higher education institutions, and training institutes. Wu et al. (2015) suggest that international students may benefit greatly from using school resources, including student associations, writing centers, counseling services, and recreation centers. Engaging in activities on campus and in the dorms can assist in reducing stress. Although many students may be fluent in a foreign language, they may struggle with oral communication. For this reason, language support is a common recommendation (Wu et al., 2015).

International students may struggle to recognize their experience of culture shock. As a result, it is critical that local students, staff members, educators, and mental health professionals help them with these issues. According to Collier (2017), regularly checking in with international students, helping them maintain contact with the school’s international office, and destigmatizing counseling can assist adjustment to transitions. Additionally, it is recommended that professors act as role models for their non-international students to teach them how to better interact with their international classmates. Organizing social events for all students, regardless of nationality, including locals, can help ease the anxiety for international students. Encouraging interaction between new and current students is recommended,



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so they can share experiences regarding the institution. Since the students would benefit from a healthier environment and less stressful learning, these activities should be viewed as investments as opposed to expenses (Khoshlessan & El-Houbi, 2015).

Some examples of activities that could help international students understand the new culture would be to establish a volunteer mentorship program of local students to be paired with international students. These mentors of culture would act as cultural bridges to explain the customs, history and culture of the United States while engaging in outings or relaxed conversations over coffee, for example. These cultural exchanges would be an enriching experience for both students and would show acculturation as a dynamic bidirectional process. Another initiative that some universities engage in is to celebrate festivities of different countries, which could include providing a presentation, showcasing photographs, and sharing food related to the festivities. An example in the United States of this type of celebration would be the 4th of July. Celebrating international festivities together would

provide a welcoming space for interaction among students.

Brooker et al. (2016) developed a diversity training model that highlights the importance of understanding how students are affected by power, dominance, access, and discrimination. This model also focuses on advocacy efforts and social action. The academic institutions from the host countries, educators, mental health providers, and supporters of diversity and equality should be the ones to recognize the difficulties of international students, serve as their support systems, and create an environment where international students do not hesitate to seek assistance. 

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