

Supporting International Students' Transition to the U. S.

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Abstract

The number of international students studying in U. S. institutions is continually increasing. In order to meet the needs of students, student affairs professionals must learn about the cultural difficulties facing students and pair their knowledge of the difficulties with cognitive development theories to create programming that will challenge students to grow and offer support and guidance where needed.

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There has been a steady increase in the number of international students coming to American colleges and universities in the past ten years. The number of students from China alone has doubled since 2008 (Fischer, 2013). The push to internationalize American institutions has continued to spread, however, universities are not equipped with the staff or resources to serve the influx of international student populations (Fischer, 2013; L. Lewis, personal communication, November 21, 2013). The strain international students experience is exacerbated due to acculturative stress, culture shock, and difficulties with language acquisition. It is essential for student affairs professionals and social justice educators to increase support for international students. By investigating ways to offer support to international students through cognitive development theories, professionals can develop a deeper understanding of international students' experiences and move forward to create supportive programming to enhance the international students' experience.

Internationalization of higher education has roots from the early twentieth century. Through the International House Movement of the 1920s and 1930s, which provided residence spaces on campuses for fellowship and programming specifically to integrate international and domestic students, campuses began to shift the way they engaged international student participation in campus life (Bu, 2003; University of California Berkeley, n. d.). The international houses served as bridges to cross difference and resulted in the first inter-racial and cross-national marriages between students on campuses (University of California Berkeley, n. d.). However, internationalization encompasses far more than the "mixed" (University of California, Berkeley, n. d., p. 3) marriages brought

forth through the International House Movement. Internationalization involves a holistic approach to “incorporate global perspectives into teaching, learning, and research; build international and intercultural competence among students, faculty, and staff; and establish relationships and collaborations with people and institutions abroad” (American Council on Education, 2014, para. 1). Europe is leading the efforts worldwide to internationalize higher educational institutions (Marmolego, 2010). The push for internationalization can lead to a variety of problems when done without foundational support. Students with Brazil’s pilot study abroad program, Science Without Borders, were sent home from universities in Canada and Australia because of low language acquisition (Bowater, 2014). Student success relies on more support and preparatory work by all parties involved: the student, the contacts in the home country (be these references, parents, or professionals at the home institution), and the host institution.

International students will leave their institutions when their reputation is at stake, when finances become an issue, and because the academics are not meeting their needs and expectations (Morgan, 2014). Student reputation is a complicated matter; international students are not solely responsible for developing their identities when they study abroad in the United States (Marshall, 1970). Whether they plan to or not, international students serve as “cultural carriers” (p. 19) between cultures and countries and the United States (Marshall, 1970). When domestic students meet international students, the students may serve as the only reference to a specific country or region and the students may be tokenized, which may cause more stress and culture shock (Marshall, 1970).

Culture shock is the phenomenon associated with the adaptation to a new culture (Ryan & Twibell, 2000). Stori (1990) enumerates changes in climate, communication

systems, transportation, health conditions, and possible isolation as some of the adjustments international students face. Ryan and Twibell (2000) add language and social etiquette differences and note that students face difficulties coping and managing stress when visiting the United States. Cutting off communication with loved ones in their home countries allows students to manage psychological and emotional distress more effectively (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006).

Overcoming culture shock comes in many forms. One form of combating culture shock is that of assimilation (Ward, Bochner, & Frunham, 2001). Li (2007) recognizes a difference between integration and assimilation. Assimilation emphasizes “the social process of being absorbed by one culture into another” (para. 3) whereas integration focuses on retaining individual characteristics while living in a community (Li, 2007). Either process is chosen by the student and requires staff support. Students who choose to assimilate may lose part of their cultural identity, thus the supports need based on their choices may vary.

Academic difficulties associated with culture difference are great. The scholastic behaviors students must adopt when coming to the United States include adopting academic language, learning to navigate individual professors' expectations, and adjusting to the grading styles of different instructors (Gebhard, 2012). Classroom expectations vary as well, culture to culture. Students from collectivist cultures may have shown respect at their home institutions by remaining silent during lectures (Robertson, 2005). Students may also adapt their professors' lecture material into the primary sources when constructing written work for their classes, something American professors may not value

(Robertson, 2005). The challenges international students face may help students with their development.

International Student Transitions: Theoretical Perspectives

One of the goals for internationalizing higher education is to foster intercultural competency in students. If students learn to be culturally sensitive, they will be better equipped to work in the global society and will abandon their ethnocentric beliefs (Pedersen, 2009). Sumner (1906) defined ethnocentrism as the exaggerated adoption of one's own culture and customs which establish them as remarkably different from others. Bennett (1993) developed a stage model for developing intercultural maturity. During their time studying abroad, American students usually make it to level three of the stage, minimization of difference (J. Doughty, personal communication, November 1, 2013). The extended duration of international students' experience studying in the United States can lend itself to developing further in Bennett's model. When the students process the ideals and values of their home culture within the context of a host culture, they can develop the cognitive complexity necessary to develop intercultural competency and maturity (Bennett, 2012; King & Baxter Magolda, 2005). Serving as cultural carriers between their home country and the United States can also help students develop the cultural sensitivity to progress towards intercultural maturity. The maturity grows as students wrestle with the societal expectations and take actions to integrate or assimilate. Integration into the host community moves students further whereas assimilation would keep students at lower levels of intercultural competency and maturity (Bennett, 1993; Li, 2007).

Cultural difference and adjustment can be looked at through Kohlberg's (2011) Theory of Moral Development. Students from collectivist cultures may have adopted

methods of studying in the classroom that do not translate well into an American classroom (Robertson, 2005). In their home cultures, the authority of the professor and of the institution may be accepted as societal law and for students to go against this would be culturally insensitive (Eastern Illinois University, 2009; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006). In U. S. institutions, students are encouraged and pushed to think critically and develop their own ideas and enhance their moral reasoning skills. The cognitive dissonance students experience when grappling with the difference in academic cultures and critical thought allows students to move past preconventional judgments where rules and social expectations are external to the individual, and into conventional and even postconventional levels of judgment where expectations become more contextual and are contingent on more than the individuals thoughts or feelings of expectations.

Similar to Kohlberg's early levels of moral development, Perry's early positions are reflected in some international student experiences. The stress students experience from being separated from their families countries, and comfortable environments causes some students to develop irrational fears of being deported or removed from their institution (Reynolds & Constantine, 2007). When students acculturate or assimilate to culture at U.S. institutions, they may deflect from development by retreating, knowing that dualism is a refuge and will preserve their ability to remain at their institution. Perry's (2011) dualism is also present in the home culture of some international students. When students operate from Perry's first position of basic duality, they believe that the authority is always correct and omniscient (Perry, 2011). International students may expect the professor to be an expert and an authority on the subject matter; learning from graduate teaching assistants and other students or professionals who have not mastered the subject may frustrate the

students (Eastern Illinois University, 2009). The frustration students experience when they realize that the instructors have some gaps in their knowledge may lead students to further develop and they will find themselves in Perry's positions of multiplicity, where they believe that not all knowledge is known. They may also move to positions of relativism, where students acknowledge that knowledge is highly contextual. Cultural integration may require students who are typically silent in class, such as students from Taiwan and China, to participate and engage in the classroom dialogue by inserting their opinions and offering arguments, the practice of which would be difficult for dualistic thinkers (Perry, 2011; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006).

Besides pushing students further in Perry's positions of intellectual development, when students are required to insert opinions and offer arguments, they are encouraged to create their own process of meaning-making. Keagan's Theory of the Evolution of Consciousness states that the process of growth makes meaning of the shifts from stability to instability one experiences based on their environments (Evans, 2010). The dissonance and difficulties international students face at U. S. institutions encourages development and growth. Students are encouraged to make meaning of their experience in an individualized way, much as a reader makes meaning of a poem in an individual way (Rosenblatt, 1969). "The reader is concerned with the quality of the experience that he is living through under the stimulus and guidance of the text" (Rosenblatt, 1969, p. 39). International students are similarly engaged in their study abroad experience in the United States. Though parents, friends, advisors, student development theorists, and professors may try to empathize or understand what the student is making meaning of, the student is the person who knows what his or her experience means. International students often come from educational

systems that are different than the United States and are caught between following U. S. and institutional culture as well as maintaining their culture and values. For students who come to the United States from cultures and countries where developing opinions and values other than that of the group is not acceptable, their studies in the U. S. afford the option to develop a self-authoring mind. Paul (2014) postulates that students with international experiences become more creative thinkers. Learning to develop one's own ideas within a different cultural context pushes students to develop further than they might in their comfortable home environment. As international students develop their own meaning making system, they can push past the identity expectations that peers and professors have thrust upon them as cultural carriers and develop their own identity (Marginson, 2013).

In the same way international students are encouraged to make meaning of their experience when studying in the United States, they are encouraged to make judgments and develop reasoning skills as they share opinions and speak up in class for the first time (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006). King and Kitchener formed the Reflective Judgment Model to consider the development of reflective thinking from late adolescence through adulthood. When international students experience culture shock and changing norms of their academic lives, they begin to make judgments on how knowledge and truth are constructed. As students cope with the stress they feel while adjusting to their U. S. studies, they may move from earlier stages of King and Kitchener's model, prereflective thinking, to later stages of the model, quasi-reflective thinking or reflective thinking (Pranata, Foo-Kune, & Rodolfa, 2007).

Looking at how the student development theories intertwine can give student affairs professionals a holistic view of how the student may develop. International students at level one of Bennett's Model for Intercultural Maturity may view their home culture as the same as the host culture. They will not look at the differences they experience and will perform and interact with the culture the way they have done previously (Bennett, 1993). The student is making judgments based on prereflective thinking, knowledge and truth are certain; the student bases their judgments based on first-hand experience and does not complicate the matter by asking questions (King & Kitchener, 2011). Some students purge themselves of their home culture when studying abroad, finding that their host culture is superior than their home culture. These students have made it to Bennett's level five, defense/reversal, a mode of thinking where students may be deflecting to Perry's dualism by finding the host culture as an authority on how culture should be lived and created (Bennett, 1993; Perry, 2011). The students have not developed the later stages of critical thinking or reasoning, but are switching one truth for another truth. When international students begin to weight the pros and cons of both cultures and the systems of education associated, the students develop the later stages of development with stronger critical thinking skills.

Conclusion

To better serve international students, student affairs professionals must build up the cultural competency to understand and work with the international student population. Acknowledging the difficulties students face must be combined with developing an understanding of student development theory and how students can grow through their experiences to work in the field. In the process of internationalizing their campuses,

colleges should work to produce a global educational network that allows students to experience growth and development within the U. S. cultural context. Campus internationalization must focus on building community and understanding within differing cultures as well as encouraging cognitive development in the students.

Institutional support can extend to breaking down some of the barriers that prove particularly difficult for international students during their time in the United States. Pranata, Foo-Kune, and Rodolfa (2007) suggest supporting international students with counseling services to help with the transitions to United States culture. Developing orientation classes that encourage active engagement in the campus activities and campus jobs also increases international student success (T. Kapan & Y. Navarro, personal communication, May 16, 2014). While developing programs and support networks to help lessen the burden for international students, student affairs professionals must also be aware of the developmental growth that can occur when students struggle through their experience while studying abroad in the United States. The goal must not be to remove all hurdles and barriers to student success, but to develop understanding and offer support to students as they live their individual experiences.

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