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## Creating a Welcoming Community for International Students

Laura Brina Semenow

*With large numbers of international students enrolled on our campuses, it is important for student affairs practitioners to be prepared to work with this student population and address their needs. Programs should be put in place to tackle their transition issues as well as help students deal with culture shock and culture learning. In this paper, I will conduct an analysis of the literature on intercultural adaptation and counseling to identify the issues faced by this group and inform suggestions for practice.*

International education exchange is the most significant current project designed to continue the process of humanizing mankind to the point, we would hope, that nations can learn to live in peace - J. William Fulbright ([www.cies.org](http://www.cies.org))

Between 2 and 3 million students each year travel to another country to study. The United States and the United Kingdom together host over a third of all international students in the world, followed by Germany, France and Australia (Graddol, 2006). During the 2006-2007 school year, there were 582,984 international students enrolled in U.S. higher education institutions, marking the eighth year in a row that the U.S. hosted more than half a million international students (Institute of International Education, IIE, 2007). With so many international students enrolled at our campuses, it is important for student affairs practitioners to be prepared to work with this student population, and to be able to address their needs. But what are the issues facing international students? How can we make them feel welcome in our institutions? Why should we be invested in their success?

### Making the Case for International Students

International students contribute to the diversity of their campus by sharing their cultures, perspectives, language abilities, and life experiences. They help students in the home institution learn about different parts of the world while absorbing a new culture and building bridges between countries. In ad-

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dition to intellectual and cultural contributions, international students make a significant economic impact on their host countries' economy. Ward, Bochner, and Furnham (2001) estimated that international students contribute approximately AU\$2 billion annually to the Australian economy, over CAD\$2 billion to the Canadian economy, and NZ\$530 million to the New Zealand economy. In the 2006-2007 academic year, international students contributed approximately US\$14.5 billion dollars to the U.S. economy through their expenditure on tuition and living expenses. Department of Commerce data describes U.S. higher education as the country's fifth largest service sector export (IIE, 2007).

International students often occupy otherwise lowly attended programs and keep them functioning. Also, they can become low-cost teaching assistants and permit high-demand undergraduate programs to function (Albach, 1998, Dalton, 1999). As the American Council on Education (ACE) explains, educating international students can infuse U.S. campuses with a variety of cultures to impart cross-cultural understanding, spread U.S. values and influence, and create goodwill for the United States throughout the world (2002). The presence of more than 500,000 international students on U.S. campuses also provides us with the opportunity to educate the next generation of world leaders – an incalculable foreign policy asset. The same can be said for other countries that recruit international students as a way to spread their culture, language, and interests (EduFrance and DAAD, 2007).

### Cultural Shock and the Adaptation Process

International students are a heterogeneous group, and individual factors can influence the adaptation process. These factors include age, gender, nationality, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, cognitive and communication style, personality characteristics, coping style, and past intercultural experiences (Cushner & Karim, 2004). Counseling literature also lists some of the major problems and issues of adjustment unique to international students: culture shock; academic difficulty arising from being in a different academic system; political, religious, and social conflicts; impacts of development in their home countries; cross-cultural male-female relationships; social isolation; depression; financial difficulties; anxiety brought on by fear of immigration authorities; stressful relationships with Americans; dealing with new-found freedom; dealing with disappointed expectations; and anxieties about returning home (Leong & Chou, 1996).

Leong et al. (1996) identified three areas of personal adjustment that are applicable to international students: those common to all students, those common to all sojourners, and those that are unique to international students. Unique stresses faced by international students include the demands placed on them in their roles as cultural ambassadors and differences in academic culture between their home country and their host country. Thus, “interna-

tional students face additional stresses to those of native students, but not all their difficulties can be attributed to their foreignness” (Leong et al., 1996, p. 212). Without generalizing international students, student affairs practitioners should make an effort to better understand the adaptation stages of this population to better meet their needs and alleviate the symptoms of culture shock.

Culture shock is the term used for the adjustment period in the transition between home and the host country. Leong et al. (1996) state that “the term culture shock was introduced to the literature after World War II and implied that entering a new culture was a potentially confusing and disorienting experience” (p. 212). Adler defines culture shock as “a set of emotional reactions to the loss of perceptual reinforcements from one’s own culture, to new culture stimuli which have little or no meaning, and to the misunderstanding of new and diverse experiences” (as cited in Bennett, 1998, p. 215). P. K. Bock (1974) explains that there are three kinds of adjustments people must make when going through culture shock: Physical adjustment (involves getting used to the more obvious differences), social adjustments (involves deeper acknowledgments and acceptance of the host country’s values, beliefs, and way of doing things) and internal adjustments (where the person comes to terms with his, her or his own intercultural identity and is able to incorporate and integrate both cultures with minimum discord) (as cited in Paige, Cohen, Kappler, Chi, & Lessegard, 2002, p. 84). Paige et al. (2002) say there are only two kinds of students that do not go through culture shock: those who are extremely flexible and experienced in intercultural learning, and those who “recreate home while abroad,” surrounding themselves with their native language, people, and foods. Culture shock can be seen as a normal and desired experience since one of the main goals of studying in a different country is learning from the differences. Ting-Toomey also asserts that culture shock, although inevitably stressful and disorienting, can have positive results if managed effectively. These positive outcomes include: a sense of well-being, heightened self esteem, cognitive openness and flexibility, increased tolerance for ambiguity, enhanced confidence in self and others, and competence in social interactions (as cited in Cushner et al., 2004).

The current literature points out four phases of cultural shock, which are sequential and cyclical (Arthur, 2004). The first stage is the “honeymoon” or “tourist” phase (Pedersen, 1995). It is assumed that people who enter other cultures have positive expectations and look forward to their experiences. In this initial stage, there is usually a fascination with cultural differences and contrasts are appraised as exciting and interesting (Arthur, 2004).

The second stage is the “crisis” or “disintegration phase.” In this phase, aspects of the culture that were interesting at first are later perceived as sources of irritation and disappointment. “In extreme cases, individuals reject the local culture and cope

by erecting barriers to viewing any aspect of the local culture as rewarding... This shift in thinking... is accompanied by strong feelings such as lack of control, depression, anxiety or psychological reactions of stress" (Arthur, 2004, p. 22). Student affairs practitioners should be especially aware of this phase, since they can help students by providing support, guidance, resources, and positive reinforcement.

Most students learn how to cope and move from crisis and enter the "reorientation" or "re-integration" phase. Pedersen (1995) says this may occur through trial and error practices or through interventions designed to address transition demands. Arthur (2004) explains that some international students cope by limiting their interaction with the host culture and associating with other students from similar backgrounds. "This reorientation does not mean that all problems with culture shock end, rather, international students develop the attitudes and the skills needed for effective problem solving" (Arthur, 2004, p. 24). Once again, student affairs practitioners are vital to helping students develop these coping mechanisms, through campus programming, community building, counseling services, and academic support.

The fourth stage of culture shock is the "adaptation" or "resolution" phase. At this point, students have acquired considerable cultural knowledge and are confident in their abilities to communicate, but recognize there is much more to learn and to understand (Paige et al., 2002). Berry (1985, 1997) asserts that students adapt in four different styles, "based in the extent they maintain their original cultural identity and the extent they engage in participation with other cultural groups" (as cited in Arthur, 2004, p. 24). Those styles were explored by Arthur (2004): Some international students do not want to or are unable to hold on to their original cultural identity and they typically assimilate to the new culture. In contrast, international students who strive to maintain their original cultural identity and who do not actively engage in new cultural contexts adopt a position of separation. Alternatively, if avenues for maintaining traditional cultural identity are blocked and there are barriers that prevent international students from joining groups in the new culture, a sense of exclusion or marginalization is experienced. A fourth acculturation strategy of integration refers to an interest in maintaining some degree of one's original culture while participating as an active member of the new culture (p. 21).

If we want to foster an environment of respect and culture sharing in our institutions, it is imperative that student affairs practitioners provide forums for culture exchange to occur, so that international students are not pressured to assimilate or feel marginalized. Students from the host institutions should be encouraged to learn from international students, in a bi-directional process. International students should be encouraged to integrate with the host culture and develop a bi-cultural identity. "It is unfortunate that many members of the host culture do not view the opportunity to interact with international students as posing the same opportunities for cultural learning and personal growth" (Arthur, 2004, p. 25).

The literature on the development of intercultural skills also helps us to understand the stages one goes through when learning a new culture. Bennett's Model of Intercultural Sensitivity shows us that when we learn a new culture, we start from "ethnocentric stages" and progress to what he called "ethno-relative stages" (as cited in Paige et al., 2002). The ethnocentric stages are "denial, defense, and minimization." In the denial stage, people are not aware that cultural differences exist. In the defense stage, people see the differences, but see them as wrong or inferior. In the minimization stage, people see the differences, but don't see them as important. They concentrate on their own culture, and emphasize the similarities between them.

In the ethno-relative stages, which are acceptance, adaptation, and integration, "people no longer view their culture as a center from which others should be judged" (Paige, 2002, p. 103). In the acceptance stage, "people cease to look at cultural difference as negative, but simply as existing. There is a great deal of awareness of the differences, but respect is given to groups who are culturally different" (Paige, 2002, p. 103). At the end of the intercultural sensitivity continuum are the adaptation and integration stages when people "maintain many of the cultural values of their original culture, but they have integrated others and are able to use at least two different cultural frames of reference for perceiving the world" (Paige, 2002, p. 104). If student affairs professionals understand the stages of cultural learning, they can help the students who are going through the process.

#### Transition Issues Faced by International Students

Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman define a transition as "any event, or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (1995, p. 27). They also state that "[there are] four major sets of factors that influence a person's ability to cope with a transition: situation, self, support and strategies" (1995, p. 49). International students face several transitions, and if supported by student affairs practitioners, strategies can be identified to achieve a successful adaptation. Arthur (2004) identified a series of common transition issues faced by international students: academic performance, communication, social support, cost of living, discrimination, gender role expectation, and family matters. These issues are explained below:

##### *Academic Performance*

Success in education abroad depends on the ability of the international students to manage their programs of study, since a large financial investment was made by the student, family, home government, or a sponsor. There is intense pressure for a great academic performance that can be exacerbated if the level of difficulty of the academic material is much greater at the host institution than the student is used to. Also, teaching and learning styles at the host institution can be different from the home institution, so students may need guidance on how to meet faculty expectations and be effective in class

participation. Lastly, when examples used in classroom discussions are solely centered in the host environment, international students may have a difficult time relating to the material and feel excluded from the discussion (Arthur, 2004).

### *Communication*

Not only is fluency in a foreign language required, but an understanding of non-verbal communication is essential for the international student to succeed. To communicate effectively in a foreign culture is a process that takes time, so both the student and members of the host community should be patient and put in effort to improve communication. Also, students and the host community should be aware that communication is more than language proficiency and also involves culture and contextual understanding (Arthur, 2004).

### *Social Support*

When moving to a different country, international students will most likely lose all previous forms of social support and traditional sources of self-validation. Many times the friendship patterns in the home culture can be very different than in the host culture, creating frustration or a feeling of disconnectedness for the international student. Fostering the creation of a community of international students can be a great form of support, but this should not be the only focus, since even students from the same country can have profound religious, ethnic, and cultural differences (Arthur, 2004).

### *Cost of Living*

Going abroad can put a great financial burden on the international student and/or their family. Just because a student takes the opportunity to study abroad does not mean the student comes from a wealthy family. Restrictions on employment and possibility of loans can put international students into an even lower economic standing than local students. Also, due to higher costs of living and high currency exchange rates, students that enjoyed certain levels of comfort at home, may have to adjust to a lower standard of living, or losing status in society, creating one more adjustment problem (Arthur, 2004).

### *Discrimination*

Depending on their nationality and race, international students may face discrimination and racism from members of the local community who view them in stereotypical ways. Institutionalized forms of discrimination are also common, where students are denied access to certain types of services or resources because they are international, have an accent, or are not seen as fitting into the domestic “norm.” Students also may feel discriminated against by “cultural encapsulation in curriculum,” when materials studied in class show their country as primitive and wrong and the host culture as correct and positive (Arthur, 2004, p. 45).

*Gender Role Expectations*

Students may come from a country where gender roles are very different from the local community and the local social norms of interacting can be viewed as “strange,” especially if views of male-female relationships are much more “liberal” or “male-dominated” (Arthur, 2004).

*Family Matters*

Being away from family support can be very difficult for international students, especially when they are missing important family events or in time of a family crisis. In other circumstances, international students may bring their spouse and children along to their host community, adding a new set of responsibilities such as financial or family member’s adjustment (Arthur, 2004).

Student affairs practitioners address transition issues faced by domestic college students by designing a comprehensive orientation program, implementing first-year seminars, or providing job search workshops for seniors. Attention should also be given to developing programs specific to the international students’ needs: helping them to adjust to the new culture; learn about the academic culture and norms; create a new social support; contend with different gender role expectations; and deal with discrimination. When student affairs practitioners understand the adaptation process of international students and the transition issues they face, they are more equipped to create a welcoming environment for this community. “Providing quality programs and services for international students is the cornerstone of any initiative to increase their numbers and to retain those presently enrolled;...satisfied international students and alumni recruit relatives, friends, co-workers, and others to U.S. schools” (Dalton, 1999). The responsibility to best serve and to advocate for international students should not fall only to the office designed for international education, but to all faculty and staff on campus.

Recommendations for Practice

Student affairs practitioners should think of ways their departments or offices are addressing the needs of this population and if any changes can be made to improve services. Below are some questions that can be raised to identify if good practices are in place:

*Career Services*

Are staff informed about visa and working regulations for international students? Can they refer students to on-campus employment? Can they identify employers that hire foreign personnel? Are programs about job hunting and resume writing available for international students who are not familiar with the host country’s job market?

*Residential Life*

Is housing during school breaks available? Are international students allowed to

move in early or move out late due to international flight arrangements? Is there staff training to address roommate conflicts due to poor language or cultural communication? Is programming being offered that stimulates cross-cultural learning? Are international students being educated on the rules, regulations, and behavioral standards in residential halls? Are international students hired as staff members?

### *Student Life*

Are international students aware of all the groups and organizations they can join, especially since so many higher education systems do not have a department of student life and activities? Are international students welcomed in the new student orientation program? Does first-year experience programming address the needs of international students? Are students encouraged to participate in leadership roles or encouraged to join outdoor programs? Are events such as International Student Day and International Education Week supported? Are students encouraged to participate in community service programs?

### *Academic Support Programs*

Are tutors trained to help students that are having difficulty writing academic work in the host language?

### *Counseling Services*

Are there counselors experienced in cultural shock issues? Are there any counseling groups that international students can join to share experiences with adjustment problems?

These are only a few questions that can be answered in an effort to help international students feel welcomed and successful at the host institution. It is also important to keep in mind the size and type of the institutions as well as the demographics of the international student population when designing programs to serve this group. For example, if most of the international students on campus are older, they may be looking for a different type of support than younger students, or if there is a large group of students from a particular cultural background, they may require a different kind of attention than students from another background. Small schools may be able to give international students a more personalized service, while large institutions should create mechanisms to ensure this population does not become invisible. With the worldwide increase in the number of students going abroad to pursue higher education, more research and publications in the student affairs field are needed to further the discussion in addressing the evolving needs of international students on our campuses. Student affairs practitioners have the responsibility of serving all students, and, by learning about culture shock and about the unique issues faced by this group, they can certainly contribute to a much richer educational experience.

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