Studying International Students: Adjustment Issues and Social Support

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Abstract

This study investigated international student adjustment issues and needs for social support while pursuing higher education in the United States. Data were obtained from individual interviews. Results indicate that international students experienced significant challenges in adjusting to academic stress, cultural differences, and language challenges within the U.S. higher education system. Adjustments to academic demands tended to present the greatest difficulty for international students. Friends and family were the preferred sources to seek help for personal issues. Students felt that providing academic and cultural orientation programs would be helpful to assist international students in making a successful transition to life in the United States.

Keywords: International Students, International Education, Adjustment Issues

Introduction

In recent years, U.S. colleges and universities have witnessed a steady increase in international student enrollment. According to Open Doors 2002, international student enrollment increased by nearly 30% across every type of higher education institutions in the eight years since 1993 (Davis, 2002). Open Doors 2002 reports that the number of international students enrolled in the United States higher education system grew 6.4% in 2002, which was the largest increase in the past 20 years (Davis, 2002). Even though international students only constituted 4% of America’s total college student population, the economic impact of their presence contributed $12 billion to the U.S. economy translating into one million jobs in the United States due to the fact that three quarters (75%) of international students received most of their funding for U.S. study from sources outside the United States (Davis, 2002; Desruisseaux, 1996). In addition to the economic contributions, international students also offer an important diversity of viewpoints to the student body and help offset a declining U.S. applicant pool in certain disciplines (Goodman, 1996; Wan, Chapman & Biggs, 1992).

The growing number of international students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities each year has called attention to provide special services to help international students adjust to the host culture and solve the unique problems they face (Boyer & Sedlacek, 1986). Scholars discovered that international students faced many difficulties in their adjustment to higher education in the United States (Boyer & Sedlacek, 1986). In addition to academic pressures shared with U.S. students, students from other countries had the stress of living in an unfamiliar culture (Reinicke, 1986). Mallinckrodt and Leong (1992) also revealed that many international students experienced significant problems in adjusting to life in the United States, including difficulty with English language proficiency, insufficient financial resources, social integration and problems in daily life tasks, homesickness, and role conflicts. These problems could be manifested as social withdrawal, inability to sleep well, sadness and
depression, academic problems, and loss of self-esteem (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992). Therefore, in order for colleges and universities to understand problems international students face after they come to the United States and assist them in their academic pursuits, more research needs to be conducted to determine their adjustment issues and identify needed support services. By gathering and evaluating this information, educators will be better able to counsel individuals experiencing such stress, to take institutional actions to help alleviate the sources of the stress, and to prepare incoming international students to better handle the pressures they are likely to encounter (Wan et al., 1992).

**Review of Literature**

For most international students, entering U.S. universities and colleges can be an overwhelming life and cultural transition. English language proficiency has been widely recognized as one of the major adjustment issues for international students (Antwi & Ziyati, 1993; Chen, 1996; Constantinides, 1992; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Surdam & Collins, 1984; Wan et al., 1992). These studies found that international students encountered great problems in communicating with others in English, especially in academic settings. Most of these difficulties were due to differences in accent, enunciation, slang, and use of special English words (Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1991).

Constantinides (1992) and Wan et al. (1992) found that the stress experienced by international students tended to center on academic situations. The authors indicated that international students often found their academic experiences to be extremely stressful. Academic demands were heavy, instructor-student interaction was often fast-paced, and the academic and social support mechanisms available to international students often were not relevant (Wan et al., 1992).

In addition to changes associated with language issues and academic concerns, international students were often faced with the need to adjust to a variety of cultural and social changes as well. Several researchers (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Parr, Bradley & Bindi, 1992; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1991) found that many international students experienced significant problems in social integration, isolation, financial crisis, and family stress. Although international students were seen to be a resilient group, homesickness and loneliness were pervasive, and depression was common (Parr et al., 1992). Irritability, excessive concern with health, distrust and hostility towards members of the host culture, depression, and lowered work performance were common symptoms of the cultural shock that international students experienced (Parr et al., 1992). Antwi and Ziyati (1993) also confirmed intense feelings of isolation, loneliness, and frustration among international students. Chen (1996) explained that loneliness among international students was likely because they had no time to make new friends due to a heavy load of academic work and the limitation of language.

International students’ help-seeking behavior was another interesting topic explored by many researchers. However, there were some inconsistent views regarding this issue. Some researchers believed that student counseling was one of the most important services for international students (Dalili, 1982; Johnson, 1993). Others (Schneider & Spinler, 1986; Surdam & Collins, 1984) argued that the use of student services by international students was infrequent, while friends, parents, and relatives were consistently preferred sources for help. Most of the students preferred to keep their problems to themselves or ask friends and relatives for advice because they did not think the international student services staff were knowledgeable about their problems (Johnson, 1993; Schneider & Spinler, 1986).

In summary, previous research has confirmed that international students encounter many problems in adjusting to the U.S. higher education system. Language and communication related problems are seen as one of the most difficult challenges for international students. Coping with cultural differences, social integration and isolation, loneliness, academic stress, and financial crisis have also been identified as important adjustment issues for international students. There were some debate and inconsistent conclusions regarding international students’ use of student services and help-seeking behaviors.
Purpose

The purpose of this research was to identify international students’ adjustment issues and help-seeking behaviors while attending higher education in the United States. Furthermore, this study also sought to determine effective support services to assist international students in making a successful life transition within the United States higher education system.

Methods

This study utilized qualitative research methods. Data were collected via individual interviews with 10 international students at The Ohio State University (OSU) during the fall of 1998. The following four open-ended questions were developed to guide the interviews:

1. What are the most important adjustment problems you encountered after you came to the United States? Please list the top two.
2. What are your most frequently used sources to get help for personal issues?
3. Have you ever used student services provided by the university? If yes, what kind? If no, why?
4. What do you think your college or department should do to help international students make better adjustments?

Sample selection for this study was based on guidelines set for purposeful selection of informants for qualitative research. Patton (1990) suggested that the logic and power behind purposeful selection of informants for qualitative research is the sample should be information rich. Based on this guideline, 10 international students were selected to participate in this study. In order to obtain a wide range of viewpoints and perspectives from international students, some demographic variables were controlled. For example, students in the sample represented 10 different countries and regions: Indonesia, Pakistan, United Kingdom, Germany, Korea, Tanzania, Venezuela, Brazil, Taiwan, and China. Among the 10 students, there were five males and five females, five were married and five were single. The average age of this group was 33 years. All 10 students were graduate students with four pursuing a Masters degree and six pursuing a doctoral degree. All of them had lived in the United States for more than one year at the time of data collection.

Results

1. What are the most important adjustment problems after you came to the United States? Please list the top two.

International students’ adjustment issues are summarized in Table 1. All students experienced significant difficulties during their early adjustment stage including academic stress, cultural differences, language challenges, food incompatibilities, living practicalities, time management, and social integration. Adjustment to U.S. academic stress (50%), cultural differences (50%), and language challenges (50%) were the three most profound issues for international students.

Adjustment to U.S. higher education academic stress tended to be the most difficult challenge that international students encountered. Students indicated that studying in the U.S was much more stressful than that of their home country due to the different teaching methods, including fast-paced class sessions, two-way interaction between professors and students, more student participation in the class, more classroom and group activities, more reading and writing assignments, more presentation and speech requirements, and more after class studying. More importantly, most international students did not anticipate these academic differences before they came to the U.S., so they were extremely overwhelmed during their early adjustment period. For example, one student reported that it took her several days to prepare her first 10-minute classroom presentation.
Adjusting to an unfamiliar culture was also very stressful. According to the interviews, the major cultural conflict between U.S. and students’ home countries was the disparate emphasis between individualism vs. collectivism. Students indicated that, in the collective cultures from which they originated, people were expected to focus on the interests of their group. The interests of the whole group should be emphasized first before individual’s personal interests; hence, people are expected to sacrifice for the benefit of others. However, in the U.S. culture, students saw that people are more individualistic and their personal interests are more important than group interests. Most students in this study were brought up and educated in a collective culture; therefore, they expected they would be able to establish the same type of social relationships in the U.S. The impact of this cultural difference upon international students was their feeling of isolation from U.S. culture and people. Only two of the students indicated that they had regular interaction with U.S. students/people.

Several students also reported problems with their English skills, but most of them expected this challenge before they came to the U.S.; therefore, it was not as intense as coping with academic stress.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>International Students Adjustment Issues (n=10)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adjustment Issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural differences</td>
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<tr>
<td>Language challenges</td>
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<tr>
<td>Food</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living practicalities</td>
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<td>Time management</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social integration</td>
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</table>

Note. Percentages presented in the table are percent of all students in this study (n=10).

2. What are your most frequently used sources to get help for personal issues?

   International students reported that they approached their friends or family, Office of International Education (OIE), academic adviser or faculty, classmates, and colleagues for advice regarding their personal problems and issues. Results show that family or friends were the most preferred source (70%) to seek help (see Table 2). Students stated that they were very connected with their fellow international students or other international students, and felt very comfortable to share personal concerns with this extended family.

3. Have you ever used student services provided by the university? If yes, what kind? If no, why?

   International students utilized five student services: OIE, counseling, student organizations, sport clubs, and career services. OIE was the most frequently used (90%) university service by international students (See Table 3). Overall, OIE advisors were seen as helpful, caring, and knowledgeable by this group. However, all the students indicated that they went to OIE for help with visas, traveling, legal problems, or financial difficulties. One student commented that OIE was a place to get help for administrative problems. For emotional and psychological problems, she would rather to share with friends or family. Another student expressed that although OIE staff cared about international students and showed personal interest in them, they seemed all very busy with immigration matters and had no time to discuss personal concerns. Only one student used the professional counseling service at the university. Most of the students in this group stated that they were not aware of the availability of student counseling service.
Table 3

Use of Student Services among International Students (n=10)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Use of Student Services</th>
<th>f</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Office of International Education</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counseling</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student organizations</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport clubs</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career services</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Percentages presented in the table are percent of all students in this study (n=10).

4. What do you think your college or department should do to help international students make better adjustments?

Students suggested that it would be very helpful if their college and department could provide orientation programs for international students addressing academic and cultural differences (see Table 4). Activities to increase interaction between international and U.S. students were also strongly recommended. Additionally, students also suggested that colleges and departments should make better connections with OIE in order to serve international students better.

Table 4

Recommendations by International Students (n=10)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Recommendations</th>
<th>f</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic orientation</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural orientation</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction with U.S. students</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better connections with OIE</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formally meet faculty one on one</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESL tutoring program</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International perspectives added to curriculum</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Percentages presented in the table are percent of all students in this study (n=10).

Conclusions and Discussion

International Students Adjustment Issues

Results of this study show that adjusting to academic stress, cultural differences, and language challenge were the three most significant issues for international students. Meeting academic demands was the most overwhelming difficulty for international students during their adjustment stage. This finding is consistent with the conclusions drawn by Constantinides (1992) and Wan et al. (1992), which noted that the stress experienced by international students tended to center on academic situations. Language proficiency was the most frequently investigated adjustment issue by many researchers (Antwi & Ziyati, 1993; Chen, 1996; Constantinides, 1992; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Surdam & Collins, 1984; Wan et al., 1992); however, students in this group felt it was not as stressful as coping with academic stress.

It was interesting to ascertain the areas in which international students did not exhibit many concerns. They expressed little concern about social integration, time management, and living practicalities. Social integration was viewed as one of the major adjustment issues in several studies (Chen, 1996; Cho, 1988; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1991). However, only one of the international students claimed social integration as an important issue. This group of students showed no concern about the areas of financial difficulties, homesickness, and health issues which were examined in several previous studies.

International Students Help-Seeking Behavior

Results of this study indicate that family or friends were the most preferred source to get advice about personal problems. This study appears to lend further support to studies conducted by Johnson (1993) and Schneider and Spinler (1986) where they noted that friends, parents, and relatives were consistently preferred sources for help with personal issues. Most of the students in this study stated that they usually consulted their fellow international students regarding their personal concerns because their fellow international students spoke the same language, shared the same culture, and had similar adjustment issues; therefore, they were the best people to provide advice.

Results of the study also confirm that the OIE was the most frequently used student service for visa, traveling, legal problems, or financial difficulties, but not for personal issues. In general, international students did not use student services frequently and most of them were not aware of available student services on campus. The underutilization of student services...
by international students is not surprising. Several researchers have confirmed this trend, especially with regard to personal counseling services (Johnson, 1993; Surdam & Collins, 1984). Surdam and Collins (1984) found that most international students were unlikely to use formal counseling services. Sandhu and Asrabadi (1991) explained this was because most of the international students were from underdeveloped or developing countries where such professional counseling services were not practiced or not normally available. Johnson (1993) also confirmed that reasons for the underutilization of counseling services by international students was lack of awareness, trust, confidentiality, and perceptions of staff incompetence.

Social Support for International Students

International students recommended that their colleges or departments should provide orientation programs for international students addressing academic and cultural differences. Additionally, students also suggested that interactions between international students and U.S. students should be greatly enhanced through various student activities.

Although this study reveals some interesting findings, caution should be taken not to over generalize the results. Because this study was conducted based on a small group of students at a single institution, it is difficult to determine whether studies at other institutions would generate similar results. Another limitation is that this research only focused on graduate students, and their adjustment issues might not be the same as those of undergraduate students.

Recommendations and Implications

The main purpose of this study was to identify international students’ adjustment issues and the types of social support that were most helpful to them. While acknowledging that all international students will suffer from various adjustment problems, whether they are academic, cultural or language-related, there is much that institutions can do to provide support and advice during the early adjustment period. Based on the results of this study, it is recommended that to ease international students’ adjustment issues, the following practices/programs should be considered:

1. Enhance academic orientation

   This study concludes that the most profound adjustment issue for international students is coping with academic demands. Therefore, departments, colleges, and universities should implement an effective orientation program stressing the academic aspects of a U.S. university education. A well-organized orientation can also help international students become aware of aspects of university life and then make better adjustments. In planning orientation programs for international students, university personnel should recognize that academic achievement is the highest priority for most international students. Therefore, discussing academic demands in U.S. classrooms and strategies to cope with academic stress should be one of the major components of the orientation programs.

   Orientation is a continuous process requiring contact with students before they arrive, and during their stay (Pedersen, 1991). It is suggested that information about United States education should be sent out to prospective international students before they leave their home countries so that they can be prepared, at least aware of the differences before coming.

2. Improve international student counseling

   Like most of the other minorities in America, international students do not have a history of seeking out professional counselors or openly sharing their feelings with strangers (Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1991). The present study suggests that many international students were not aware of the counseling service available to them. Under these circumstances, it is important that the counselors take initiative to find out if international students need any help, and make better connections with OIE to help international students.

   Findings of this study reveal that OIE advisers are the most trusted university staff for international students. It is therefore recommended that international student advisers in OIE should strive to provide international students more assistance in dealing with the cultural shock and adjustment to the U.S. academic demands.
3. Strengthen language support
   Though most international students did show proficiency in written and comprehension English when they were admitted to United States colleges and universities, they faced a number of difficulties when they had to communicate orally in an academic setting. It would certainly help if “conversation partners” programs were available to more international students. It may also be helpful to organize mini-communication workshops as a part of the orientation programs. In these workshops, international students may become familiar with the use of colloquial English, commonly used slang words, and the social and cultural mores of U.S. society in order to communicate effectively both in academic and non-academic settings (Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1991).

   In addition, university ESL department may also play an important role in assisting international students to make a successful life transition by designing an effective curriculum for international students. It is recommended that ESL department should integrate culture and academic orientation contents and survival skills to their classes. Robinson (1992) recognized the importance of ESL department in helping international students and recommended that by making the implicit cultural knowledge explicit in their instruction and providing opportunities to develop essential skills for university work, ESL practitioners can empower international students to develop necessary skills and knowledge for their academic pursuits.

4. Increase interaction with American students
   This study shows that international students felt isolated from U.S. students and culture. Therefore, creating programs to bridge international and U.S. students is highly recommended. Interaction with U.S. students will improve international students’ language and communication skills and also provide them with opportunities to understand and adjust to U.S. culture. Previous research has discovered that international students who spent more of their leisure time with U.S. students were significantly better adapted than those who spent more leisure time with their fellow citizens (Surdam & Collins, 1984). A variety of programs can be designed to achieve this goal, such as English conversation partner programs with American students, culture clubs, and international festivals.

5. Establish social connections for international students
   Given the great connection international students have with their extended family, perhaps OIE or college/department could increase efforts to promote contact among fellow international students. Students who came to the U.S. earlier may have the potential to become effective peer helpers. Having their senior fellow international students discuss successful methods for coping with cultural and academic differences might enhance adjustment.

   It is also essential that international students be informed of the student services and other resources available to them. Student service staff should be aware that even when social support services are made available to them, international students often fail to take advantage of these programs because of cultural differences, academic pressure, and isolation from the campus community. Therefore, institutions of higher education must be persistent in reaching out international students.

   In summary, providing social support to assist international students in making a successful adjustment is an important issue that warrants further attention in American higher education. Not only is the social support crucial for the positive well being of international students, but social support also provides a powerful coping resource for persons experiencing stressful life changes (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992). OIE may be the first place to go for most international students with problems, but it is certainly not the only resource. Wan et al. (1992) found that students who believed they had a stronger social support network perceived themselves and objectively confirmed through their behaviors to be more capable of coping with stressful academic situations. Therefore, universities may ease international students’ adjustment issues through assistance in establishing these social support networks.

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References


