

## International Students' Likelihood to Seek Counseling while Studying Abroad

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### Abstract

*International students experience significant stressors while studying in American colleges and universities, yet they use psychological services far less than domestic students (Misra & Castillo, 2004). Factors such as previous experience with counseling, perceived effectiveness of counseling style, and nationality were found to be factors affecting international students' use of counseling services (Dadfar & Friedlander's, 1982; Mori, 2000; Hyun, Quinn, Madon, & Lustig, 2007). This action research study adds to the literature by presenting suggestions about the manner in which international students may be most effectively served by their campus counseling centers, using information drawn from a focus group and a survey.*

**Keywords:** International students, multicultural counseling, culture shock, college counseling

Due to an increasingly globalizing economy, educational institutions have become more accessible to international populations, and counseling services must consider ways to competently meet the needs of enrolled international students. According to 2011 enrollment statistics, there were 723,277 international students studying in American Universities (non-degree seeking students included), up by about 30,000 from the year prior, and enrollment projections suggest that this trend is likely to continue (Open Doors 2011, 2011). In addition to the usual college stressors of adapting to new academic and social pressures, international students have the added strain of language and cultural barriers to overcome. Arthur (2004) suggests that there are significant gaps between the push for higher recruiting quotas for international students and the responsiveness of institutions in providing adequate infrastructure and support. Further, international students' familiarity with counseling in their home countries, as well as their acceptance of its use as an appropriate means of managing personal difficulties, are major factors that determine whether or not they may seek counseling while studying in America (Dadfar & Friedlander, 1982; Nina, 2009). Research indicates that international students may be more likely to seek services from counseling centers at universities if they understand the services and feel that these services are developed with their particular backgrounds, needs, and challenges in mind.

There is limited research addressing the

necessary steps to increase international students' use of counseling services, to conclude their grasp of counseling centers, or even to determine what multicultural competencies are required for effective counseling of these students. This paucity of research indicates the need for an Action Research Study (ARS) that will serve as a needs assessment of a particular set of international students. Taking available research into consideration, this ARS focused on exploring the immediate concerns and needs of international students at a university in the southeastern part of the United States and the likelihood that these students would utilize services available through the university counseling center.

### International Students' Need and Support

#### Influx and Projected Increase

The Institute of International Education's Open Doors Data indicate that undergraduate enrollments have increased significantly from 274,431 international students in 2010 to 291,439 international students in 2011 (Open Doors 2011, 2011). According to the Council of Graduate Schools 2011 report, the number of graduate international students studying in American Universities continues to increase. The year 2011 marks the sixth consecutive year of growth and the largest increase in applications from international students to graduate schools (Bell, 2010). Graduate



student enrollment across the United States increased in 2011 by almost 3,000 international students. This brought the total number of degree-seeking international students enrolled in 2011 in American universities to 588,013. The total number of international students in the United States includes non-degree students enrolled in English as a Second Language programs, and those seeking optional practical training after graduating from degree programs. The total number of international students enrolled in American colleges and universities, across all degree and non-degree programs, in 2011 is 723,277 (Open Doors 2011, 2011).

### **Need for Specialized Support Services**

The increase in international student enrollment necessitates that institutions of higher learning develop support services to aid the students in adjusting to their new environments. Misra and Castillo (2004) found that while the impact of stress on American college students has been studied, there is a deficit of studies evaluating stress and adjustment of international students. Misra and Castillo's comparison study between American and international students enrolled in the United States found that while both groups of students experience many of the same stressors, such as "family-related pressures, scholarship requirements, financial burdens, competition in class and course-related stress" (p. 133), international students experience the additional difficulties of cultural adjustment. These culture-specific demands include issues with linguistics, which may directly impact their academics, but definitely impact their interpersonal and intrapersonal interactions. Other culture-specific demands include international students' unfamiliarity with American learning systems, which may manifest when international students serve as teaching assistants as well. To international students, the American learning system may have different requirements of students, different testing styles and frequencies, unfamiliarity with American teaching systems, which may have different requirements of teaching assistants who find it difficult to gain acceptance, and trust and respect from American students due to their foreign teaching styles and accents (Mori, 2000).

Further, cultural differences in perceptions of and reactions to stressors from their American counterparts may significantly determine the coping strategies that international students employ. Common physical medical reactions to stressors may include

fatigue and lethargy, loss of appetite, headaches, and/or gastrointestinal problems, while mental health reactions may include anxiety and depression. While American students are generally more aware of and educated about counseling services and are likely to access these services to cope with personal and academic stressors, international students are more likely to seek medical care services than their American counterparts (Misra & Castillo, 2004; Nina, 2009). This indicates that international students' somatic and emotional complaints are less distinguishable as stress-related, and therefore their psychological coping mechanisms may be significantly diminished (Nina, 2009). Mori (2000) also points out that social relationships may be greatly impacted by cultural differences in understanding Americans' "superficial pleasantries—'Come on over sometime,' 'Let's get together soon,' and 'I'll call you'—are interpreted by international students as positive signs of sincere interest" (p. 138) and can lead to misinterpretations of Americans' concepts of friendships and romantic relationships. These combined stressors, the medical and emotional responses, and the cultural separation between international students and their new environments can be described as indicators of a phenomenon known as culture shock.

### **Implications of Culture Shock**

Culture shock involves the impact of losing a familiar culture to an unfamiliar one, but could also include the loss of support systems, as well as familiar sights, sounds, tastes, smells, practices, customs, and other life experiences (Thomson, Rosenthal & Russell, 2006). One major byproduct of culture shock is homesickness, a condition characterized by a longing and desire for those missing attributes, often resulting in depressive symptoms. While all university students who live away from home experience some level of homesickness (Chow & Healey, 2008), Tognoli's (2003) landmark study found that the farther away from home students were, the more likely they were to experience homesickness. Another stressor that may impact international students' adjustment to the host culture, according to Poyrazli and Lopez (2007), is their perception of instances of racial and ethnic discrimination. While these researchers found that most non-white Americans reported perceiving more discrimination by administrators, peers, and faculty than did their white classmates, Ying, Lee, & Tsai

(2000) found, in a comparison of the perceptions of American-born Chinese students and international Chinese college students, that the international students experienced and perceived experiencing more discrimination than did their American counterparts.

### **Addressing Myths and Misunderstandings**

All counselors working with international students should be aware of the prevailing myths about this population. Some of the most important include myths that international students are the “cream of the crop” from their countries, are from wealthy families, and are experienced travelers and thereby inoculated from culture shock and/or homesickness. Other myths suggest that international students never use counseling services, and that when they do, they are more difficult as clients. Arthur (2004) addresses each myth and emphasizes the importance that counselors take the extra step necessary to understand the cultural views of their international students and to help these students understand what counseling is and “how it is relevant to their academic and personal adjustment” (p. 13).

### **Understanding and Counseling International Students**

Despite data indicating that international students experience far more adjustment challenges than their American counterparts, international students are less likely to use counseling services than American students and when they do use these services, they are likely to terminate before the counseling relationship has had the opportunity to impact lasting change (Hyun, Quinn, Madon, & Lustig, 2007). Dadfar and Friedlander (1982) examined the attitudes of international students toward seeking psychological help and found that factors such as regional origin of the students played a major role in their likelihood to seek counseling services. Students of Western origin (European and Latin American) were more likely to seek help from a counseling professional than non-Western international students (African, Asian and Middle-Eastern). Other cultural factors such as beliefs about mental health problems as manifestations of immorality (Mori, 2000) and past experience utilizing counseling services for academic and/or psychological challenges (Komiya & Eells, 2001) were high indicators of international students’ use of these services. Merta, Ponterotto and Brown’s (1992) study, focusing on Asian male international students, found

that the length of time the students had spent acculturating in America had a direct impact on both their likelihood to seek out counseling as a means of problem resolution, and their preference for a more directive counseling style. In contrast, highlighting the risk of stereotyping in counseling, a landmark study involving international students who were actual counseling clients demonstrated that there was no clear preference amongst international students for more directive styles of counseling or more client-centered styles (Yau, Sue & Hayden, 1992).

### **Implementing Targeted Counseling Services**

Arthur (2004) recommends that counseling services follow the four main dimensions of service delivery and organization. These include the “problem focus,” which assists international students in resolving practical challenges such as meeting housing needs, course selection, employment and financial matters; the “counseling focus,” which requires culturally competent and dynamic counselors willing to work with international students in individual settings, psychoeducational workshops and support groups; the “interaction and communication focus,” which supports international students through co-national, bicultural and multicultural cooperatives on campus; and finally, the “culture learning focus,” which includes programs that promote greater understanding of other cultures represented by international students.

While there have been research studies focusing on challenges that international students face while studying in America (Dadfar & Friedlander, 1982; Mori, 2000; Ying et al., 2000; and Hyun et al., 2007) and studies that reveal international students’ infrequent use of mental health services on campus, there are few studies focusing on specific factors that increase international students’ utilization of counseling services. A search of academic research databases found few relevant results on this issue. Overall, the existing research failed to address the issue directly and exhaustively with suggestions for resolution of the problem.

### **Method**

Our Action Research Study focused on the support area of counseling services, and systematically examined factors that are crucial determinants of international students’ use of these services while studying in the United States (U.S.). The Action Research (AR)



method emphasizes that research is carried out by participant agents who are seeking to evaluate, improve and/or increase the efficacy in provision of services for their particular field of practice (Ferrance, 2000). This study utilizes the AR design because the participant researcher/principal investigator (PI) is also an international counseling intern finishing his educational specialist degree in counseling at the campus counseling center. Additionally, the AR design includes surveys of international students on specific variables that impact their decisions to seek counseling services, and those that may prevent counseling-seeking behavior, during their studies at a southeastern university with an on-campus counseling center (CCC). The variables listed on the survey were taken from a focus group interview with international students that invited them to share details about their knowledge of counseling and the counseling center, their experience of counseling and the counseling center, and their likely use of both in the future. The research questions that this ARS sought to answer included:

1. What can be done to increase international students' use of counseling services?
2. What do international students know about the campus CCC?
3. What multicultural counseling competencies are required to effectively meet international students' needs?

The hypothesis is that international students will be more likely to seek counseling services if they understand the services and feel the services are developed with considerations of international students' diverse backgrounds, needs, and challenges. The research hypothesis focuses on those variables that are most important in international students' consideration of counseling services and suggests that creating easier access to these variables will in turn create more interest in, curiosity about and positive expectations of counseling services.

### **Participants**

Student participants were recruited from the international student club and invited via email to participate in a focus group at a Southern University. The University has 11,283 students, and 1.4% are international students. Initially, the focus group was meant to include 1 participant from each of the 10 following regions that had international students represented at the university: Canada, North-Mid

Africa, Eurasia, Europe, East Asia, Mexico, South America, Southern Africa, West Asia, and the Middle East. We used this design following the research of Dadfar and Friedlander (1982), which indicated that factors such as regional origin may play into counseling decisions of international students. We were able to recruit Five individuals for the focus group, who represented the first five regions in the list (Canada, Ghana, Russia, Germany and China) because students from the other regions did not respond to the invitation to participate.

Qualitative data from the focus group were used to develop the survey, which was distributed to international club members at one of their bi-monthly club meetings. The survey respondents consisted of 18 international students who ranged in age from 18 to 27 years ( $M = 20.7$ ,  $SD = 2.6$ ). Eight participants identified as female and 10 as male. Nationality was spread out as follows: Three participants were from China; two each from Denmark, Ethiopia, France, Germany and Nigeria and one student each from Ghana, Jamaica, Wales and Zimbabwe.

### **Procedure**

Participants for the focus group and survey were recruited to participate in the study via an email invitation that was sent to them due to their membership to the International Student Club listserv. The lead author of this paper also attended one of the club's meetings to announce the ARS and to notify members of the email about the focus group that would be sent out. Students who volunteered for the focus group completed informed consents and participated for the full 90-minute research session. After the focus group, the survey developed from the focus group themes was given to members of the International Student Club in attendance at the subsequent club meeting, each of whom volunteered to complete the survey, and also signed an informed consent form. This ARS was sponsored by the International Student Club and the International Programs & Services Department of the university. Sponsorship entailed purchasing refreshments for the focus group and stationary for the survey portion of the ARS.

### **Instrumentation**

**Demographics.** Focus group and survey participants were asked to report their country of origin, age, visa type, ethnicity, gender, and length of stay in the U.S.

**Likelihood to seek counseling.** For the focus group, a set of questions were developed to initiate the discussion: “*What does a counselor do?*,” “*Have you ever met with a counselor?*,” “*What counseling-related services are available on campus?*,” and other similar questions, which produced responses that elicited more spontaneous questions. Using this data, an 11-item survey was developed. The survey included 10 Likert-scaled questions ranging from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree) and one open-ended question inviting comments, questions and/or concerns. Neither the focus group questions nor the survey questions were tested for validity and/or reliability. While some items were drawn from relevant literature, others were created from the concerns raised by the focus group participants. One such item was whether the perceived “warmth and friendliness of a counselor are more important” than their training.

## Results

### Reliability

As multiple administrations of the survey were not feasible with this sample, no measure of its reliability was derived. The results of the survey were analyzed for patterns and comparisons. Specifically, patterns concerning the research questions and the survey items created from the focus group were analyzed.

### Knowledge and Use of Counseling Services

Among the results from the focus group interview was a resistance to terminology. The Canadian participant, for example, stated that she viewed the word “counseling” to be a negative term and surmised that other students probably viewed the word in the same light. She reported that this negativity derived from the implication within the word that there is a dysfunction that needs to be fixed. While the Chinese participant agreed with the negative associations that most of his friends have towards counseling, he admitted to having a personal view that was positive. Conversely, the Russian participant initially explained that she was indifferent to the word, and later added that she did not understand the function or purported benefit of counseling. When asked about their use of counseling services, participants began describing positive experiences with academic advisors, emphasizing the importance of their warmth and approachability. Upon

further description of the role of a professional counselor, the German participant mentioned that she had received a training segment in one of her classes that focused on suicide prevention, and reported that this was an outreach presentation organized by the counseling center. She reported that at the time, she was unsure as to the reason for the topic, as it was not a consideration that she could imagine that college students had. She added that toward the end of the semester however, she had begun to feel so depressed herself that she could now empathize with those who might consider suicide. None of the other participants reported prior use of, or more direct familiarity with counseling.

Similarly, in the survey, eight out of 18 participants reported they were aware of the counseling services available through the CCC, Four reported not knowing, and six students reported that this information (and/or the lack of it) was not relevant to them. Likewise, eight participants reported that they would encourage a friend to see a counselor; four denied that they would and six reported that they would not react either way. A slight shift occurred when the participants were asked whether or not they would seek counseling in a crisis or emergency. Eight participants reported they would seek counseling, while surprisingly eight participants responded neutrally to this question and two individuals reported they would not seek counseling even when dealing with a crisis or emergency. In terms of privacy and confidentiality, the responses were evenly split between six participants reporting that this was an important factor in their consideration for counseling, six participants responding neutrally, and six participants expressing that privacy and confidentiality were not determining factors in whether or not they would seek counseling.

### Need for Support Services

In the focus group interview, the German participant reported that upon initially receiving the suicide prevention training, she wondered why there was so much emphasis being placed on it. After a semester of studying in the United States, she felt more overwhelmed with academic challenges, and more isolated from her friends and family and even from Americans. She reported that she could now understand the reasons for the high rate of self-harming behaviors among students in U.S. colleges and universities. Her sentiments regarding experiencing homesickness, feeling isolated, and needing special



support and assistance with this adjustment were echoed by all the other participants. This was equally reflected in the research survey where over half of the participants reported having experienced homesickness while studying in the United States, which corroborates Tognoli's (2003) findings. Likewise, the same number of participants reported that they take active steps to maintain a healthy wellbeing to cope with the stressors they encounter. Only three participants, however, felt that counseling was effective at helping those in need, as compared to a substantial 12 participants who responded neutrally, and two participants who indicated that they felt counseling was not helpful.

### **Person-Centered Professional Approach**

During the focus group interview, participants repeatedly veered the discussion about their knowledge and use of counseling services, and the skill-sets they expect counselors to have towards professors, academic advisors, and friends who had been consistently warm, supportive and welcoming. All but the Chinese participant reported that they had personally experienced or witnessed negative responses towards the adjustment difficulties of international students perpetuated by the international office staff. These participants further expatiated that because of these negative experiences with their primary university contacts, they were less likely to patronize other university departments. More so, they (all participants, including the Chinese individual) reported that the credentials of the counselors were not as important as qualities such as consistent warmth, friendliness, genuine interest and a welcoming smile—qualities that they had discovered in random professors, academic advisors, and friends. Further indication of similar views came from the survey results: Seven participants reported they felt uncomfortable talking with a counselor, while five participants disagreed that they felt uncomfortable, and six responded neutrally. Finally, confirming the focus-group findings, 10 respondents agreed that warmth and friendliness of the counselor would be more important to them than the training (and possibly the credentials) of the counselor. None of the participants disagreed with this idea, but seven of them chose to remain neutral and one participant gave no response to the question.

### **Discussion**

This ARS focused on the dominant views expressed by international students towards counseling services provided on a university campus in the southeastern United States. Findings generally supported the hypotheses derived from Tognoli (2003) that most of international students experience homesickness while studying in the United States. Yet, while the German student acknowledged that she became overwhelmed with academic challenges and felt herself become isolated from friends, and that she came to understand the need for suicide prevention information, she did not appear to connect her needs with the help she might receive from counseling.

Findings further demonstrated that most of these students would seek out counseling in the event of a crisis or emergency, but only if they were aware of the services and felt comfortable using them, following the findings of Arthur (2004). While over half of the survey respondents in the ARS reported experiencing homesickness and about a quarter admitted to having experienced trauma, only eight respondents conceded that they would seek out counseling as a means of coping with these situations. Our findings suggest that many of these students have adopted other means of coping with homesickness, stress, and crises rather than seeking counseling, and that these are active and deliberate means of coping with the extraordinary experience of studying in a foreign land, on a foreign campus. These findings are consistent with the number of respondents who reported little or no knowledge about the counseling center or indicated that the presence or absence of the counseling center is irrelevant to them.

Interestingly, on the survey, male participants reported a statistically significant higher level of willingness to seek counseling in times of crises. This was an unexpected finding; however, the overall number of male participants was slightly larger than the number of female participants, and this factor may have an extraneous effect on the measure.

In a seeming contradiction to this finding, none of the males reported that they were comfortable talking to a counselor about their personal challenges. An equal number of females reported that they were comfortable talking to a stranger to those who reported they were not. This appears to imply a degree of ambivalence on the part of the male participants regarding the counseling process. Furthermore, although more males indicated that they would

themselves seek counseling to cope with an emergency or crisis, far fewer of them expressed that they were likely to encourage others to seek counseling, in contrast to the female participants. This may suggest that males are less likely to recommend counseling to others because of how they may be perceived for promoting its use, while females were more likely to show their concern for others by recommending counseling even when they may not themselves subscribe to it. The tendency to recommend counseling to others seemed to peak when the participants had spent about 6 months studying in the country, with the next peak occurring after having spent about 4 years in the country. Likewise, the trend towards seeking their own personal counseling services stayed almost exactly the same with the highest peak occurring 6 months into their sojourn and then again at the 4-year mark. These findings seem to confirm Merta, Ponterotto and Brown's (1992) findings that the length of time that Chinese students had spent acculturating correlated with the likelihood to seek counseling.

Although participants from more individualistic cultures (Wales, Denmark, France, Germany) were expected to place a higher premium on privacy and confidentiality than their counterparts from more collectivist cultures (Nigeria, China, Ethiopia), there seemed to be no discernable pattern to the emphasis placed on this issue solely based on culture. The same diversity of responses occurred in terms of gender and duration of stay in the U.S. Other students from individualistic cultures (Germany, France) expressed neutrality about these issues.

This brings up the issue of what factors international students may find most important about the counseling process. The issue of the perceived friendliness and approachability of a counselor arose from the focus group discussion, where participants spoke in depth about the importance that counseling be performed by an individual with a warm, vivacious, and welcoming personality, as opposed to a person who had acquired the training and credentials to do counseling but who did not manifest these qualities. There were a number of anecdotes regarding favorite faculty and staff who fulfilled the students' desire for personal safety, and with whom these students were then able to share of themselves. These anecdotes were supported by the responses of the survey, which confirmed that credentials and training of the counselor were perceived to be less of a motivation to pursue counseling than was the perception that the counselor was warm, welcoming, curious, and open-minded. It appeared from the focus group discussion and the survey responses that the international students were lacking information about Rogerian and client-centered approaches to counseling that may be

available to them through the CCC.

### Limitations

There are a number of generalizability limitations to this study. First is the fact that a relatively small sample size was used to represent an ever-growing population of international students. The second is the use of self-reported surveys. As a result of the small number of participants completing surveys at an international student meeting, participants may have answered questions in a more socially desirable manner to avoid being stigmatized if identified.

Another limitation is the visa status of all the participants, which was initially intended to be non-resident-based alone. During the course of the analysis, it became clear that some of the responses may have belonged to students who had either been born in or had simply resided in other parts of the world for extended periods of time, but were currently considered exclusive or joint residents of the United States. The lack of validity and reliability of the focus group and survey questions may limit the generalizability of this survey to other settings (Training Gap, 2010). A final limitation of the study was in the wording of particular items on the survey. For instances, the time-sequence of the questions (present and past-tense) may have been confusing to the responders. The survey also failed to address other pressing areas of concern such as culture shock and culture-specific alternatives to counseling.

### Implications for Counseling and Future Research

This ARS found important differences in the perceptions of international students' understanding and use of counseling services and those of the administrators who create the policies and programs within which the student services are housed. As such, the findings from this ARS, while not completely generalizable, have implications for other CCCs that serve international students. One set of the focus group narratives seems to confirm the need for outreach by CCCs to educate international students about counseling. This must be done by shedding a positive light on the services; allowing the students to perceive counseling as a constructive process, rather than reinforcing the stigma that is too often associated with seeking the help of a counselor. Other issues related to the roles that gender, nationality, culture and acculturation as well as the personal and professional competencies of the CCC staff are also important.

Due to the cultural differences amongst international students, it may be a practical consideration for CCCs to employ dynamic and creative strategies to



educate, inform, and attract this population group early and often in their stay in the United States. For example, the findings indicate that males may harbor contradictory feelings towards counseling. As such, it may be beneficial for counselors to be prepared to help such students work through feelings of ambivalence, indifference, passion, confusion, and the like, all within the same client (within the same session), and potentially within the same moments as would be the case in a group counseling setting.

This ARS adds to the body of research knowledge regarding international students' use of counseling services while studying in the United States, and considerations that universities must make when recruiting, inviting, and/or welcoming students to their campus. Further research needs to focus on the diverse regions of the world with the largest growing numbers sending students and to determine effective ways of presenting the counseling process to them.

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