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Jing Luo

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Career Services as a Bridge to International Student Acculturation and Success

Jing Luo

The recruitment of international students is a current trend in United States postsecondary institutional development. How to support international students as best as possible is highly related to the retention of international students. This article will explore how career services offices help international students better integrate academically and culturally. Additionally, this paper will discuss career services' impact on the retention of international students and institutional long-term development.

The number of international students has grown substantially among United States colleges and universities. According to the Institute of International Education (IIE), total international student enrollment in the U.S. increased 6% between 2011 and 2012 to a record high of 764,495 international students (Institute of International Education, 2012). Among various types of institutions around the world, American colleges and universities are one of the leading destinations for students from around world (Crockett & Hays, 2011; Shen & Herr, 2004).

As international students enter campus, they encounter language barriers, culture shock, isolation, homesickness, disorientation, and depression (Crockett & Hays, 2011; Shen & Herr, 2004). Sherry, Thomas, and Chui (2009) noted that “students who are not offered effective social, cultural and economic support are more likely to be vulnerable to exploitation or social exclusion” (p. 35). Therefore, it is imperative to help international students engage in local communities and acclimate to host campuses’ cultures. Moreover, international students’ main objective through overseas study is to obtain degrees, specifically by succeeding academically (Tidwell & Hanassab, 2007). A portion of international students pursue academic ambitions while dealing with the pressures of physical and emotional discomfort in order to achieve their career aspirations (Leong & Chou, 1996; Pedersen, 1991). As a result, by linking academic success to professional development, international students will gain more exposure to U.S. culture and improve their acculturation.

Jing Luo is a first-year Higher Education & Student Affairs graduate student at the University of Vermont. She received her B.A. in teaching English from Fujian Normal University, China and also holds a M.Ed in Educational Leadership from the University of Vermont. Her identity as an Asian student influences her research interests in international students’ acculturation. She enjoys every moment working with students and she is determined to stay in the field of international education.

Career Services for International Students

While the primary purpose for international students may be to gain a necessary degree, the skills and opportunities they receive far exceed those gained in the classroom. Student success encompasses much more than earning a high GPA; success also includes leadership skills that aid in gaining a career after graduation. Support outside of the classroom concerning academic success is necessary to improve practical skills that will benefit international students both inside and outside the classroom. As a result, career services can serve as a bridge between academia, the workforce, and the student's adaptation to a new culture.

Previous literature suggests that international students appear to have a more difficult college transition when compared to that of U.S.-born students (Olivas & Li, 2006). Also, international students tend to be more hesitant than their U.S. peers about seeking career counseling (Mori, 2000). Previous research also indicates that many students exclusively rely on their academic programs to meet their professional needs. This includes professional activities, academic conferences, and their personal connections, such as family, friends, and colleagues (Crockett & Hays, 2011; Olivas & Li, 2006; Shen & Herr, 2004). In some majors like math, science, and engineering, students tend to think that they will find a desirable job as long as they have outstanding academic performance records, professors' recommendations, and strong reputations within their departments or programs (Shen & Herr, 2004). This conventional approach to seek professional assistance from academic resources may prevent international students from seeking assistance from career services.

Many international students think that campus career services offices are designed to be primarily U.S.-oriented and geared toward American undergraduate students (Davis, 1999; Leong & Sedlacek, 1989; Mori, 2000; Shen & Herr, 2004; Spencer-Rodgers, 2000). Many jobs and internship opportunities only apply to domestic students, and, as a result, international students may think that they will not get accurate career assistance. Shen and Herr's (2004) research suggested that if career services offices clearly advertised supporting international students in obtaining information about internships or jobs, more students would access such services. Thus, adequate communication between international students and career counseling personnel needs to be encouraged.

Some international students come from countries without career services in their higher education institutions (Shen & Herr, 2004). As a result, many lack motivation and awareness to consider their professional development and do not take initiatives to access services (Shen & Herr, 2004). A small portion of international students do occasionally utilize career counseling but only to obtain general services, such as résumé building, polishing cover letters, teaching interview skills,

and job-searching workshops (Shen & Herr, 2004). Thus, it is necessary to motivate and encourage international students to be familiar with career counseling, as “positive attitudes toward seeking professional counseling often help require the students to have a higher level of acculturation” (Shen & Herr, 2004, p. 24).

Language barriers and cultural gaps can also contribute to infrequent interactions between career counseling personnel and international students. These barriers discourage international students from seeking help and hinder their proactive behaviors to pursue career aspirations (Mori, 2000). In their interviews, Shen and Herr (2004) found common differences related to cross-cultural considerations, including cultural expression and communication. Shen and Herr (2004) also found that Asian students tended to be more soft-spoken, and European students seemed to be more aggressive in communication than domestic students. These nuances in cultural communication may prevent international students from seeking career counseling. Career services centers may not advertise clearly that they can provide international students career assistance (Shen & Herr, 2004).

It is typical that U.S. postsecondary institutions offer multifaceted career services and highly encourage students to take advantage of their assistance (Crockett & Hays, 2011). Such services are crucial for international students as they experience more difficulty in career and internship placement than domestic students due to their visa restrictions and cultural barriers (Crockett & Hays, 2011). However, career counselors may not know what international students need and the specific laws associated with their visas. International students are only allowed to find a job placement highly related to their majors in the U.S. according to immigration laws (Crockett & Hays, 2011; Shen & Herr, 2004). When career counselors merely provide general advice, which is more likely to apply to domestic students, international students may assume that it is a waste of time and thus are not willing to seek their help.

Career Services and Acculturation

International students “have always remained one of the most quiet, invisible, underserved groups on the American campus” (Mori, 2000, p. 143). They are frequently unprepared emotionally and psychologically for being a minority in an unfamiliar majority culture (Murphy, Hawkes, & Law, 2002). International students’ complex transitions are intensified as they undergo the difficult process of moving towards university study (Mori, 2000). Acculturation is “the dual process of cultural psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members,” (Berry, 2005, p. 698) and it is an unavoidable stage for all international students. International students will often go through the transition of language communication, sociocultural change, educational pressures, psychological adaptation, and practical stressors

when they shift to a foreign country and college life (Owens & Loomes, 2010).

Learning to adapt to new cultural norms has significant challenges and should be approached from various angles (Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2009). Student counseling services is a potentially positive coping resource for international students who are facing acculturation-related stressors. However, research suggests that counseling services are underutilized (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Smith and Khawaja (2011) stated that “universities may have adopted an assimilation attitude, expecting international students to utilize services that are culturally acceptable for domestic students, but may not be culturally appropriate for some international students” (p. 706). Therefore, career counseling may be geared towards U.S. undergraduates and not offer culturally sensitive counseling for international students. As a result, career counseling may not offer assistance for international students and might make acculturation more difficult.

Work restrictions in the students’ host countries can also be a concern for international students. It is hard to transfer academic knowledge and skills to practice due to legal barriers. Career counseling plays an integral role in addressing career-related stressors. According to Love and Maxam (2011), helping relationships are central to the profession of career counselors. In this relationship, problem solving is the most frequently used skill by counselors. Counselors must avoid establishing premature boundaries, such as their personal predispositions, that might restrict their abilities to see creative solutions (Love & Maxam, 2011). According to Roe Clark (2008), “effective helping is not accidental, but rather the intentional result of a skilled and structured interaction intended to foster rapport, self-understanding, and positive action” (p. 167). Intentionally avoiding preliminary perceptions and creating interventions to meet international students’ needs is the first step to address the gap between career service personnel and international students. Conversely, conducting interventions without reflecting and deliberating with effective practices in the profession might constitute negligence and educational malpractice (Harper, 2011). Not all interventions are designed to reach all students as some strategically focus on particular groups of students. This strategy is likely to meet individual needs, promote exchanged ideas and resolve conflicts as they arise.

The interventions and programs of career services may increase international students’ chances of completing their programs by enhancing interconnectedness of academic performance and practical experiences while strengthening belonging, cultural integration, and integrity (Owens & Loomes, 2010); this contributes to their acculturation. Behavioral interventions have been carried out through peer mentoring programs in which international students are paired with domestic students, further aiding social adjustment and enhancing social support (Mamiseishvili, 2011). Such programs also help to improve academic achievement and increase

utilization of university services including counseling services. One advantage of pairing students in this way is the sharing of experiences that broaden the views of both students. This strategy will help students step out of their comfort zones and integrate into new environments.

Although career services is just one small aspect in an international student's life, consistent contact and support from career services can make a difference in helping international students transition more smoothly from college life to social independence. Throughout this transition, the cultural exchange is a mutual learning process for both international students and career counselors. International students have the opportunity to learn how to maintain their cultural identities to be successful, view the social change as a positive part of educational experiences, and adapt themselves to dominant norms of the institution (Andrade, 2007). Meanwhile, career counselors are able to explore ways to prepare international students for their career successes, implement practices to provide culturally sensitive support, and deepen their awareness of cultural integrity and integration (Andrade, 2007). Undoubtedly, career assistance is an indispensable part of international students' transitions as well as a major contributor to acculturation.

Implications

Due to international students' needs for individualization when addressing career assistance, career counselors need to enhance their multicultural consciousness, sharpen their cultural sensitivity, and apply global perspectives (Olivas & Li, 2006). "Increased awareness of strategies and factors that may lead to both positive adjustment and experiences for some international students can help college counselors and personnel develop programs or interventions to aid students in achieving [a] high level of adjustment" (Olivas & Li, 2006, p. 219). Therefore, encouraging counselors to obtain a theoretical and practical understanding of international students' needs and experiences is strongly warranted (Yoon & Portman, 2004).

After professionals are aware of international students' internal and external pressures and needs, it is more likely that professionals will provide effective services and guidance through designed programs which provide students with enriched learning experiences (Yoon & Portman, 2004). One way of accomplishing this is to establish and develop partnerships with other offices and professionals. International education offices are one of the best resources with which to collaborate (Shen & Herr, 2004). These units offer workshops that disseminate information about international students' legal restrictions, general requests, and disparate cultural gaps. Therefore, career counselors will gain a basic sense of international students' cultural backgrounds and psychological needs. Another group with whom career services might collaborate are faculty members. As international students are only allowed to seek a job highly related to their majors, it is crucial to

get basic information about their majors from faculty departments, subsequently providing international students career guidance based on their academic uniqueness and career aspirations.

Partnerships with international alums are crucial. Partnering with graduates may help provide students with new perspectives, and will help current international students gather information, reflect upon their own professional development, and expand their networks. Moreover, working with graduates helps to build a database to increase accountability in tracking job opportunities for international students. This will help record the specific processes of how career counseling helps international students seek placements and meanwhile provide future international students resources.

To best serve international students, career service offices must develop outreach partnership programs with offices of international education, faculty members, academic departments, and international alums. Through this programming, career counselors will have more contact with people from other fields, cultural backgrounds, and people who hold different perspectives. In formal counseling, career counselors will capitalize on their cultural consciousness, skills, and expertise to provide guidance. Conducting counseling sessions with students from different regions will enrich counselors' multiple cultural perspectives, behaviors and norms, and help counselors improve their counseling effectiveness (Killick, 2011). This "reciprocal relationship that could aid in cultural awareness and sensitivity" is highly emphasized and recommended (Olivas & Li, 2006, p. 219).

Impact

Supporting international students should not be viewed as the responsibility of only one office or department. Instead, it should be regarded as a joint responsibility of a broader campus community, including faculty members, students, and student affairs professionals. "Embracing the role of helper as central to the mission and goals of student affairs allows practitioners to not only contribute to the growth, development, and well-being of students but also benefits the larger campus community" (Love & Maxam, 2011). By providing substantial support for all international students, the institution can increase retention, recruit more international students, build the institution's global reputation, and create a campus environment that is "intentionally designed to offer opportunities, incentives, and reinforcements for growth and development" (Harper, 2011, p. 289).

Though career counseling is only a small part of student affairs at an institution, it enables international students to transition from college life to social integration with deeper and broader understandings of acculturation and cultural integrity. Furthermore, support is more likely to retain international students because the

support gives them opportunities, enhances their practical skills, increases their confidence, enriches their experiences, and enables them to be prepared for the world outside of college. Providing quality support will contribute to international students' retention and an institution's sustainable recruitment and development.

Conclusion

“Students’ integration both into the social and academic systems of the institution has a positive impact on their subsequent goal and institutional commitment that consequently enhances the likelihood that they would persist to completion of their postsecondary education” (Mamiseishvili, 2011, p. 4). Every student affairs professional’s knowledge, insight, and cultural awareness into who international students are and what they need in order to learn, grow, and be responsible enables the institution to steadily develop (Love & Maxam, 2011). Career services must assume some of the responsibility of linking academic and social systems and helping international students adapt themselves to the outside world. These efforts will increase international students’ retention while improving institutional reputations.

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