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Working Effectively with International Students at Higher Education Institutions

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Introduction

Good morning. First I would like to thank you for choosing to attend this session of the Marshall University Multicultural Conference. I will share with you some of my findings on a topic related to international education. These findings are based on published research on international education and on my personal observation. I am the advisor of two official Marshall University student organizations. The majority of the members of these organizations are international students or are students who have some exposure to international education. I meet with the members of these organizations once in a while and try to help them solve some of their problems.

International Students in the United States

According to the latest statistics, published in the most recent issue of The Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac (September 1, 1995), there are more than 412,463 students from 59 different countries studying in higher education institutions in the United States. This number includes only the students from countries that send large numbers of students to the US. There are other international students who are not counted in these statistics, such as international students who are married to American residents or citizens, recently immigrated residents, and students from countries that send just a few students to the US. Therefore, unofficial sources estimate the number of international students to exceed one half million.

Before addressing special characteristics, needs, and problems of international students, I would like to share with you the answer to questions that some people may have in mind. The questions are: Why do some people travel to foreign countries to study? Why do some countries send their young people to study abroad? Don’t these countries have universities at home? Isn’t it too costly to send students overseas?

Most countries do have universities, often prestigious universities. And it is indeed costly for these countries to send students overseas to study. But the real issue is not money, nor is it the lack of higher education institutions in foreign countries. There are, in fact, many reasons why countries throughout the world send their students abroad to study. Among these reasons are the following:

1. Education leads to better understanding of other peoples, a condition that will lead to improved international relations and world peace.

2. Education overseas improves students’ background, leading to an increase in their acceptance of diversity.
3. Knowledge of a foreign country will lead to a more stable world.

4. Increased knowledge of others clarifies one's understanding of oneself.

The Merits of Serving International Students

From the vantage of US universities, there are many benefits from having international students on campus. Some of these benefits are educational ones, including the following:

1. International students expand the horizons of US students and scholars. Goodman, a Georgetown scholar, who published several articles on international students, supported this fact. He talked about several projects involving international students and American students. An international student impressed the professor with her answer. In his conclusion he said, "I could have lectured on this subject, but the student's presentation was a far more compelling testimony."

2. They are vital to the quality of teaching and to the learning process. One professor said "the questions posed by foreign students in international relations courses often challenge our assumptions, forcing teachers to confront a different set of issues and consider vastly different perspectives." A professor from Georgetown University stated, "my students consistently tell me that the presence of foreign students is why they come to Georgetown."

Some of the benefits of having international students on US campuses are economic. These include the following:

1. International students bring foreign exchange into the country. Therefore, they help local economies. "In New York State alone, foreign students generated $145 million in foreign exchange earnings in the form of living and other expenses in 1981-1982" (Altbach, p.598).

2. Foreign students have become big business for many countries. Institutions, the government, and local business have hired people to handle the needs and demands of foreign students. Examples of these service organizations are the TOFEL, the National Association for Foreign Students' Affairs, which publishes materials relating to overseas students and acts as a lobbying group, the Institute for International Education, which is responsible for student placement, as well as various other activities.

3. Many people have careers that are based on their provision of services to foreign students. Some serve as administrators; others perform related jobs.

There are also political benefits that arise from educating international students in US
colleges and universities. After they graduate, many foreign students go back to their home countries. Some of them work in business, others work in educational institutions, and others hold policy making positions. The impact is obvious on us here in the United States. In fact, the literature demonstrates that many governmental policies toward the US shifted after international students went home and assumed policy making positions.

**Common Characteristics of International Students**

The literature on international students in the United States reveals what we might call a core of common characteristics that describe the majority of international students. These characteristics include the following:

1. International students tend to associate more closely with each other than with students from the US.

2. They are unfamiliar with or may fail to make use of the special services and other resources available to them, such as legal services, writing labs, advising offices, and so on.

3. International students may not be familiar with or may fail to make use of counseling and psychological services.

4. International students may be reluctant to seek counseling or advice from professional counselors or campus authorities for fear that their immigration status or reputation will be placed in jeopardy.

5. Many international students come from family-oriented cultures, so they have a tendency to view older persons as wise and worthy of respect.

6. They may not view appointments as very important. The concept of time varies from culture to culture. Students may arrive early or late for appointments and may even arrive on a wrong day. Yet they still may expect the faculty member or administrator to see them. Their expectation may be that persons in positions of authority are always available for them, just as a parent might be.

7. Many international students hesitate to participate in class discussions even though they know the answers. Some are shy; others are afraid of making mistakes in spoken English.
Common Problems of International Students

As any traveler, migrant, or sojourner might, international students face some problems while they are away from home. We can divide these problems into three different types.

1. Problems common to all higher education students such as the distress associated with living away from home, problems of living or socializing with unfamiliar people, and so on.

2. Problems specific to migrants or travelers, such as adjustment to weather conditions, adjustment to being away from home for a long period of time, and so on.

3. Problems unique to international students, such as adjustment to receiving education in a second language, financial difficulties, immigration problems, adjustment to a different type of educational system, and so on.

Among the adjustment difficulties of international students are the following: home sickness, loneliness, culture shock, academic problems resulting from the inability to adjust to a different language and educational system, political conflict, social conflict, religious conflict, cross cultural conflict in values (e.g., appropriate male-female relationships), financial difficulties, and immigration problems. In addition, international students, like other students, have concerns about their futures. These concerns may become intense as international students approach graduation and begin to think about what is next. Furthermore, international students, like minority students from the US, may be the victims of stereotyping.

What is Needed: Guidelines for Working Effectively with International Students

In an effort to help international students achieve their goals, both institutions and individuals can take positive steps. Institutions should:

1. Build close relationships with national organizations that have an interest in international education. These national organizations have experts on their staffs who can provide help and advice on specific issues. Examples of these national organizations are the National Association for Foreign Students Affairs (NAFSA).

2. Offer and participate in educational activities such as workshops, conferences, and guest lectures that relate to international education.

3. Provide orientation sessions and workshops that help prepare international students for performing specific tasks and handling problems that are typically encountered.

4. Organize multicultural activities such as food fairs, home-coming days for
international students, and host family programs.

5. Arrange special activities such as a round table programs that involve faculty, staff, and international students in discussions of relevant issues.

6. Encourage internal departments and units to get involved with international students.

7. Organize a “resource bank” of faculty, staff, and residents from the local community who have an interest in international students.

8. Distribute literature to faculty and staff about the concerns and needs of international students.

9. Survey international students at least once each semester to find out about their problems, concerns, and needs.

10. Be very careful in the selection of counselors or guides who work directly with international students. The characteristics, such as the age, race, and knowledge of world cultures, of these helpers should be taken into consideration.

11. Involve faculty and staff who have familiarity with a particular culture in the counseling of students from that culture.

12. Provide cross cultural training for counselors and other staff who work with international students in order to help them develop better communication skills.

Individuals within higher education institutions can also take positive steps to help international students achieve their goals. Among these steps are the following:

1. examine our own values in an effort to understand others,

2. improve awareness of our own cultural backgrounds,

3. learn more about how to be culturally sensitive,

4. be willing to give and take, teach and learn,

5. set aside stereotypes, which give false conceptions and contribute to problems,

6. support our schools in their efforts to recruit international students,

7. involve international students in local community projects, and
8. Attend training sessions that deal with diversity and especially, international education.

It is also important for individuals to keep from making generalizations about international students. These students come from different countries and have different backgrounds. Even those students who come from the same country may vary in background with regard to such factors as their social status, religion, behavior, and so on.

Conclusion

Human resources with all their diversity constitute one of the most valuable assets in higher education. International students are an essential element of these human resources. They are here not only for their own education, but also to enrich our educational system with new knowledge, values, and experiences.

As is the case with many other college students, international students experience a wide variety of new role expectations, problems, and procedures. Coping with these role expectations and overcoming these problems is not an easy task for most international students. Therefore, the higher education community, including faculty, staff, and students—can provide important support in helping international students adjust to new roles and handle the problems they encounter. Bridges should be built between all members involved. Universities should be especially concerned to provide the help that international students need so that these students will be able to achieve their goals.
References

Altbach, Philip G. (Summer 1996). The foreign student dilemma. Teachers College Record 87, 4, pp.589-610.


