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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the broad scope of difficulties that international students encounter upon their arrival at an American institution. These students are confronted with unfamiliar customs, unappetizing food, a novel educational system, loneliness and isolation, communication difficulties, prejudice, confusion about relationship building, and lack of knowledge about social and student etiquette and American survival skills. Colleges provide a variety of support services for the incoming American freshman student, but all too often ignore the unique problems of the foreign student. Institutions that expect to serve adequately the international student population need to provide an ongoing counseling program designed specifically for students from abroad. (Author)

A Rationale for a Counseling Program Designed Uniquely for International Students

by Diane C. Altscher

PREFACE

The following paper is meant to provide an overview of the type of difficulties encountered by international students attending American colleges and universities. My purpose is to establish a rationale to support the contention that international students are not adequately served by present student development services, and that a counseling center designed specifically for international students can fill this void. The contents of this paper served as a foundation to a proposal for an International Student Counseling Center by Mrs. Patricia McMillen, Director of International Advising at The George Washington University; together we shared this information at the 1976 APGA convention in Chicago.

A Rationale for a Counseling Program
Designed Uniquely for International Students

The focus of this paper is the international student-- his difficulties, his desires, and his needs. It is a timely topic; the numbers of international students have grown tremendously. In 1904, 2,673 students from 74 countries attended North American colleges. By 1962 the numbers had soared to 64,705 students, and today we have over 140,000 international students attending college in the United States. These numbers are not limited to specific types of institutions; indeed, community colleges join their year counterparts in the increasing enrollments of students from abroad, and graduate schools report greater numbers of applicants from other countries.

Traditionally, our institutions have handled the international student's educational responsibilities in either one of two ways: They have ignored this population, or they have established an office to deal with their unique difficulties. The international student advising office is a relatively young component of higher education. The office of the first foreign student adviser was established at the University of Illinois in 1908. The George Washington University established one of the earliest offices in 1929, but before World War II only 13 colleges or universities had such a facility. But with the numbers of international students increasing, more attention is focusing on other means of providing, in a more comprehensive manner, the services so necessary for the international student's educational success.

When a student comes to the United States, he is typically attempting

to obtain a good education, the quality of education that is not available to him at home. He comes to learn in our advanced educational system with the objective of returning home to share his new knowledge and benefit his homeland. He is also seeking to learn about another culture, another people, and to broaden his cultural scope.

But the institution also benefits from the international student. Because of today's increasing financial crunch, higher education is tapping into new potential student populations. Enrollment numbers mean financial stability, and the international student enrollment is especially attractive as an untapped resource. Private schools, especially, have made concerted efforts to actively recruit in other countries. Colleges and universities are pleased to have these students, whose attendance adds prestige to the school. Such an institution can then boast that their academic offerings have an international reputation and drawing power. Also, the international atmosphere is, in itself, intellectually exhilarating. It provides the meat, the political controversy, and the cultural and intellectual exchange that stimulates academic departments like political science and international affairs.

The exchange is, therefore, mutually beneficial. It is a contract; on one hand the student offers the university his money and his cultural diversity. In exchange, the school offers its education and its educational support services. It is here where the contract most often breaks down; it is here that the institution fails to keep its part of the bargain.

Let us look at this more closely. The typical support systems are established in order to enhance the student's ability to draw upon its

academic offerings. They are provided so that the student can make use of his full intellectual potential. With this in mind, colleges all over the nation have established career, housing, counseling, food, admissions, study skills, and student activities services. Most of these services, as excellent as they are, are logically geared to meet the needs of the erican population of the institution. In doing so, the needs of the international student population are shortchanged.

For instance, the campus career service typically aides the student in his job search, and provides useful information to the student body about the job market and the job trends. But the three major career questions of the international student are not usually addressed within the career services: 1) Where can I gain employment in my home country, and what is the job market like there for my degree? Furthermore, how much can I expect to earn? 2) What are the legal restrictions on my working here in the U.S.? Can my spouse work? and 3) What if I decide I do not want to go back to my home country? What if I decide I want to work here, settle here, or at least continue my education here in graduate school?

The counseling center, or psychological center, usually provides individual or group therapy to students. Why is it that so few international students use this service? This is a difficult question, as it focuses in on the intricate difficulties of cross-cultural counseling and programming. We know that the international student has two counseling needs; he has the problems and concerns typical of college students, and he has needs or problems unique to him because of his internationality--how to make American friends, deal with homesickness, study in a foreign language, learn new social skills, balance

old cultural values with new ones, and so on. We do not really know what it means in different cultures to ask for help; for some it means failure, weakness, or de-masculization. One Pakistani man confessed that he could not possibley discuss personal problems with a stranger, especially a woman. Counseling, as we know it, is not a universally accepted mode of coming to grips with personal difficulties.

The financial aid office, which in these hard times, admirabley struggles to adequately fund its American students through grants, scholarships, loans and work-study programs, is often at a loss when an international student is in financial distress. Money is a bigger issue for these students. According to the immigration laws, students are required to be fully funded before entering an American institution. However, currency exchange rates are not always stable, and inflation rates can quickly erode a student's savings. The cost of housing and food can be more than he anticipated, and this, coupled with employment restrictions, often leaves a student in a financial crunch. Personal problems, like being cut off from family funds, or the funder finding he cannot support the college expenses any more, complicates the money problems of international students. In addition, going home for vacation, going home to work during summers, and visiting family is often too expensive. What can financial aid officers do in a situation like this?

Student activities, again, are geared towards American interests, and often ignore the international student population. Indeed, it is hard to generalize about the interests of this population, as they are likely to be more varied than our own population. One of the biggest problems for international students is dealing with the loneliness and isolation which accompanies

coming to a new country. Social difficulties have many causes; the language barrier is certainly one of the biggest. The language barrier often places the international student in an inferior position in intellectual discussions. His "inferiority" becomes the basis of relationships with others. Roommates feel comfortable giving instructions and guidance, but not relating on an equal give-and-take basis. These students are often highly competent and proud individuals; to find themselves looked down upon by others is a difficult egg to swallow. To find that this is the major basis for relating to others, for being close to others, is an overwhelming revelation that shatters the student's feelings of self-confidence.

Students from other countries find that they have to deal with prejudice--not only being prejudiced against, but carrying prejudices of their own. International students are not always well received by fellow students, who find that it is not worth their effort to befriend someone from another country. Impatience with customs and language may well work to isolate the student from his American peers. In addition, however, because of our mixture of cultures, students often find themselves in close contact with students who were traditionally homeland rivals or political enemies.

Differences in friendship building etiquette often is a source of anxiety. Different feelings about social distance, body distance, expression of emotion, depth of friendship, loyalty, and the amount of disclosure appropriate, can be confusing and disappointing. Dating and mating behavior causes much personal discomfort. Questions about how aggressive a man should be, sexual limits, woman's liberation, indixes of affection, picking up on rejecting behaviors are often compounded by the fact that these subjects are often taboo--extremely uncomfortable for the international student to discuss.

To their credit, many student activities offices have responded to the social needs of foreign students by facilitating the formation of international student clubs, and by using the international student population as a unique resource for programming. But the integration of the international student into the mainstream of the college population is the exception rather than the rule.

Even the academic services offered to the average student population does not suffice for the international population. When a student first applies for admission, the admissions office must estimate the level of work completed by the student, and his grasp of the language. This must be carefully and accurately done, before the student obtains his passport, his visa, and his financial backing. Once the student is here, a mistake is difficult to rectify, and will most often result in the student failing to meet the academic standards required at his school. The admissions office is the first contact that the student has with the school, and questions, be they legal or academic, are apt to come this way. Despite the growing numbers of foreign applicants, the diagnostics involved in selecting appropriate applicants is rather sophisticated and methods of selection notoriously lacking in rationale and procedure.

Academic advisement, which for many students is a perfunctory student service, is crucial for the international student. Overly burdened professors often do not have time to provide top notch advisement to the international student, advisement which takes skill in assessment of the individual, and solid knowledge of the academic demands of the department. Judgements about how many hours of what type of courses a student can handle need to be made, keeping in mind the increased probability of failure for these students

because of new language demands, new class procedures, and personal adjustment stress. The fact of the matter is that faculty members are not trained in these skills and often poorly advise international students. This is unfortunate since most colleges offer few support systems to catch potential faulures before they happen. Failure, which is all too possible for the international student, can have miserable consequences for him. It may be his first encounter with failure, and it may mean a disgrace to family at home, and an investment wasted. Students who are academically suspended wrestle with feelings of remorse, inadequacy, and guilt. Some feel that they cannot go home to a family which sacrificed so much and which sustained so much hope for the student's success.

Although little energy is typically expended on initial adjustment (college orientations tend to emphasize social and intellectual skills, while international students need survival skills), even less attention is given to the student's re-entry into his own homeland again. Returning home often raises questions about changes in the family, in the home town, and in oneself. It means looking for work. It means leaving friends and leaving a familiar student life. It means dealing with possible desires to stay in the United States, and it may mean building some unrealistic expectations of life back home. Alumni services have little relevance to the student who returns home and leaves his American alma mater forever.

Thus, it appears that we are presently failing to uphold our end of the bargain. I wonder about the ethics of inviting students from other countries to our campuses and leaving them to flounder; meanwhile, we ask them to pay the same fees as other students' fees which support our standard student development services. These services are, too often, inapplicable or inadequate to meet the needs of international students, the students who

need them the most to survive academically.