



INTERNATIONAL  
STUDENT AND  
SCHOLAR  
SERVICES

# Addressing Mental Health Issues Affecting International Students

Edited by Patricia Burak

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## Introduction

By Patricia Burak

The lived experiences of international education professionals who have worked with international students experiencing mental health challenges evidence the need for guidance, examples of effective methods for supporting the students, and the professional expertise now available within the field. The purpose of this publication is to provide such guidance. It draws on both the educational and professional expertise of experienced international educators, student advisers, mental health practitioners, and health insurance industry colleagues, and is based on both research and practice. The willingness to share the knowledge and experiences featured in this volume stems from a belief that those in the field of international student advising and support really make a difference.

Mentoring practices, which fundamentally build relationships, are featured in several chapters. It is commonly found that international students do not comfortably turn to college counseling offices or seek psychiatric help without guidance, motivation, confidence, and trust—which frequently comes from members of the international students and scholars services (ISSS) office. Building relationships that provide international students with that support and assurance is essential.

This volume is divided into two parts: the first on strategies for addressing mental health challenges that international students may already be facing, and the second on preventative measures to mitigate mental health stressors before they reach critical points. Starting off Part I: Preparing for and Responding to Mental Health Challenges Affecting International Students, [chapter 1](#) presents an overview of factors that commonly contribute to international students' psychological distress or impede their avenues for seeking help. This chapter is beneficial for ISSS professionals to understand the experiences of the students they serve and lays the foundation for the guidance presented in the following chapters.

In [chapter 2](#), specific focus is centered on common cultural factors that may contribute to East Asian students' mental distress when studying in the United States. Data justify such a focus. In the 2017–18 school year, one-third of all international students who studied in the United States hailed from China (IIE 2018). As Peter Briggs, director of the Office for International Students and Scholars at Michigan State University, reflects in *Understanding International Students from Asia in American Universities: Learning and Living Globalization*:

Rising numbers of Chinese students also brought forward rising numbers of mental health crises. The University Counseling Center was seeing a higher number of Chinese students facing issues of depression as well as the other issues often encountered by all college students. The Counseling Center hired a Mandarin-speaking counselor who collaborated frequently with the Office for International Students and Scholars and was active in her outreach to Chinese students. (2017, 206)

In chapter 2, practitioners will find the cultural contexts surrounding mental health issues, and tips for addressing them, especially helpful in this era of all-time high Chinese student enrollment rates in higher education in the United States.

After presenting background on some factors that contribute to mental health challenges experienced by international students, the volume offers practical guidance for various situations ISSS practitioners

may encounter, starting with referring students to counseling. Sometimes the mental health challenges international students face are beyond the expertise of ISSS faculty and staff, and professional counseling or other services are needed. [Chapter 3](#) explores culturally sensitive tactics for ISSS advisers to connect their students to counseling services. It includes steps advisers may take and possibilities for overcoming barriers.

Most ISSS professionals know that U.S. health insurance—a difficult system to navigate even for those who have grown up in the United States—is one of the most complicated and mystifying components for international students. Written by an expert from International Student Insurance, [chapter 4](#) covers the ins and outs of insurance, particularly related to mental health services for international students.

The final three chapters of Part I deal with serious circumstances that ISSS advisers must be prepared to handle. [Chapter 5](#) discusses how international students can find themselves in circumstances related to dating, sex, and sexuality for which they are totally unprepared. Title IX violations are especially challenging for the members of the international student population who come to this new playing field unaware of the “game rules.” Written by an international education professional and Title IX compliance officer, this chapter tackles the intersection of dating and/or Title IX issues and mental health concerns within the international student population. These issues are explored through discussion, practical checklists, and case studies. Finally, [chapters 6 and 7](#) equip advisers to effectively act in the situations they hope to never encounter, addressing mental health crises and student suicide, respectively.

While Part I prepares staff and faculty to advise international students experiencing mental health challenges, Part II: Promoting Mental Health Among International Students looks at opportunities to establish support networks and programming for international students before mental health crises arise. Programming that educates and guides international students is necessary and must be supported on campus. Many institutions say that they are seeking ways to support the mental health needs of international students but need models to follow. [Chapter 8](#) offers such a model for peer mentoring programs. This comprehensive chapter presents everything an ISSS office needs to establish peer mentoring programs that pair international and U.S. students, including peer mentor goals, a training model, and the research to back it all up.

As an undergraduate mentor at a large private university explained:

Mental health is a tough topic to talk about here. Sometimes when students need emotional support from us, we are able to relate because we are also students ourselves...For many [international students], we are one of just a very limited number of people that they trust and are willing to talk to. —Aby (Boyang) Feng, Syracuse University

Chapters 9 and 10 reflect on other programs or resources international student advisers might develop to create smooth transitions to U.S. college life. [Chapter 9](#) focuses on topics specific to international undergraduates, while [chapter 10](#) takes a practical approach to common communication issues discussed throughout the volume. Both chapters follow up overviews of various hurdles international students must overcome with checklists that can help ISSS professionals mitigate them.

Those in the field of international education have unique opportunities to create the pathways for students to connect with mental health support, affirm its value, and model it in discussions and presentations. Together, the chapters in this volume provide structure to build these pathways or enhance practices already in place at institutions. Chapters may be read together to inform a holistic approach or

in isolation for support on specific concerns. They may also be helpful for justifying the development of new positions (as in Briggs’s Michigan State example) or financial support for mentoring or other programs. References and lists of additional resources are embedded throughout, not only to substantiate the material within the chapters, but to give guidance for further research.

The contributing authors, all dedicated practitioners and/or scholars in their respective fields, thank NAFSA for this opportunity to share their knowledge, experiences, and advice with others in the field of international education exchange.

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## **Part I: Preparing for and Responding to Mental Health Challenges Affecting International Students**

## Chapter 1

# Common Factors of Mental Health Challenges Among International Students

By Xuhua Qin

International educators do not have to look far to find evidence of rising mental health challenges. The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) reports that almost one in five U.S. adults experiences mental illness (NIMH 2017). The ratio increases to about one in four when zooming in on populations of average college age (NIMH 2017; Forbes-Mewett and Sawyer 2016) and to about one in three for college freshman specifically (APA 2018; Jackson 2019). It is regularly observed that these numbers are compounding over the years (e.g., Forbes-Mewett and Sawyer 2016). Research indicates that this rise extends to international students, as well, with one study citing a 6 percent increase in international students who report that health issues have impacted their academic performance—and nearly 83 percent of these cases were “mental” or “psychological” (Atack 2018).

While it is difficult to gain accurate data on rates of mental illness among international students—for reasons discussed at length in this volume, including social stigma and cross-cultural communication barriers—available research confirms this is a pivotal topic for university staff who work with international populations. Studies of international students in the United Kingdom find that 36 percent of international students report “poor mental health” (Atack 2018; Kennedy 2018) with the same percentage admitting to having felt suicidal at some point. Accounts of specific mental health disorders or symptoms, such as depression and anxiety, are far from uncommon among international students as well (Poyrazli 2015).

Most professionals who work with international students have likely experienced scenarios similar to those described below:

### **Scenario 1**

Grace is a 25-year-old international student in the second year of her doctoral program. She is from China and has been in the United States for about a year. She recently “disappeared” from her classes and has not responded to emails or phone calls. Her adviser becomes concerned about her, eventually locating her and walking her to the dean’s office. In the dean’s office, she has difficulty communicating in English. She says she struggles in classes and has been sick recently. She feels ashamed because she was a top student in her country of origin, and homework was never a problem for her. She feels guilty for not having successful results on her research project. She has been avoiding her adviser for a long time. Grace says she feels overwhelmed, and she has not been sleeping and eating well for weeks. She says she misses home, but she has not told her parents about her difficulties. She believes she cannot not tell her peers or advisers either. She feels isolated and hopeless. She’s wondered what it would be like to “not need to worry about all these difficulties anymore.”



## Scenario 2

Henry is an 18-year-old international student who is completing his first semester of college. He attended an international school in his country of origin and went on some short trips to other countries as a teenager. Therefore, he thought that the transition to the United States would be a smooth one. He is doing fine academically after coming to the United States, but he is surprised by the difficulty of connecting to his U.S. peers. He finds he does not share common interests or hobbies with his U.S. peers. He is treated like an outsider, which leaves him feeling isolated and depressed. He used to have a big group of friends in his country of origin, which is quite a contrast to his current experience. He doubts whether coming to study abroad in the United States is the right choice for him.

The two scenarios above reflect how everyday stressors can lead to more serious mental health challenges. They highlight some factors that contribute to the mental health struggles that many international students face—such as isolation, communication barriers, academic roadblocks, and new perceptions of self-identity—and common manifestations of these struggles—such as feelings of physical illness and withdrawal from family and other support systems.

This chapter discusses these factors in more depth. It presents common challenges that international students may face and how these obstacles contribute to their mental distress or access to mental health resources, laying the foundation for the chapters and practical advice that follow in this volume. It is worth noting here that all international students have different experiences, so professionals should not assume that these challenges impact everyone in similar ways or to similar degrees.

## SECOND LANGUAGE ANXIETY

It is not novel to highlight that language and communication are two of the biggest concerns on international students' minds. Most international students whose first language is not English relay that they cannot fully understand others in classes and in social interactions. Talking with others in any setting can provoke anxiety, due to hurdles including understanding different accents; “keeping up with” the conversation; and understanding cultural reference, slang, and jokes (Hamamura and Laird 2014; Kuo 2011). Many international students are self-conscious of their own English language abilities, consistently wondering, “Did I just make a grammar mistake?” or “Did others notice my accent?” or “Did they understand me?” This second language anxiety is not only common among students who are relatively new to the United States, but also is prevalent in students who have lived in the United States for years and who, from others' perspectives, are fluent in English.

As a result of these and other second language anxieties, many international students choose not to call on- or off-campus offices, including those that can offer resources for addressing mental health issues. It is intimidating to communicate without being able to rely on other clues, such as facial expressions, gestures, or other environmental hints. Particularly for students who come from cultures that commonly combine verbal and nonverbal messages to understand the bulk of communications, talking with someone on the phone means that a portion of the message is missing, which can provoke misunderstandings and confusion. Second language anxieties can lead to isolation not only from one's peers, but also from professionals who can help in times of mental health crises. (For more on connecting international students with mental health professionals, see [chapter 3](#).)

## ISOLATION

Feeling lonely and isolated is common among international students. In a Pennsylvania State University (PSU) study of 198 international students, loneliness was the fourth most common psychological stressor; more than a quarter of respondents reporting experiencing such feelings (Poyrazli 2015). A lot of international students describe their life as a pendulum clock moving between the classroom or lab and their own apartment. Sometimes, they do not interact with even one other person in between.

Even during my classes, people hardly spoke to each other. I saw most of them sticking to their folks from their own country or being on their own. By the end of the second month, my enthusiasm had literally died. I felt quite isolated. Like everyone else, I started searching for fellow Indians in my class and on campus. Skepticism had set in. I was not sure if I could adjust in the new environment.

—Moshmi Sanagavarapu, international graduate student from India

Some students explain that the lack of interaction stems from busy schedules, or the nature of their study or work environment. But most of the time, it also relates to second language anxiety in social settings, difficulty identifying common interests with domestic students, confusion about previous interactions with domestic peers (which may make the student more apprehensive to try again in the future), and misunderstandings caused by different cultural communication norms or definitions of friendship. For example, some international students feel confused when their U.S. peers pull out their calendars to try to schedule a “simple” friendly meetup, whereas hanging out with friends does not need a lot of advanced planning in their home culture.

Commonly, international students struggle with small talk, not knowing where to start a conversation with U.S. peers. Others struggle with how to deepen connections after passing the small talk phase. The concept of “boundaries” is often brought up in the process of building or maintaining friendships. This concept can be new to some international students, especially to those who come from collectivist cultures. These international students long for deeper connections and commitments in friendship. They may find disappointment in friendships they build in the United States, which creates senses of loneliness and isolation. Many times, such loneliness and isolation eventually contribute to more severe mental health issues.

## CRASH OF EXPECTATIONS

Oftentimes, the most difficult problems that students face are the ones that catch them by surprise. Yes, most international students expect that studying abroad will be difficult, but many do not realize just how hard it can be or how hardships will affect their self-perceptions until they come to the United States and live in the environment.

Many students have the image of U.S. life as liberal, financially stable, and happy. But when their experiences are quite different from what they expected, the power of this crash is strong enough to put them at low points, even making them doubt their decision to come to the United States, and in many cases think of returning home or dropping out of their institution. This crisis in the initial arrival stage is not uncommon among new international students.

Not only are students' perceptions of their new environments altered, but often so are those of their home countries. Many international students share that only after leaving their home country do they understand what it means to be a person of their nationality. They start to be more aware of how their cultures impact the ways they think, feel, and behave. These observations and insights, on one hand, may help increase self-understanding and self-acceptance. On the other hand, they may make students question their cultural practices, which can shake fundamental beliefs that they have held for a long time. Sometimes, intergenerational conflicts can arise as students and their parents grow apart on values. Identity crises and resulting family conflicts may lead to mental distress.

Beyond changes in perceptions of place and culture, the deviation from self-expectations can be especially hard to deal with. A lot of international students come to the United States as victors of rigorous selection processes, exams, and financial hoops. They have strong senses of mission, such as continued success in the United States (regardless of what "being successful" means to them). Consciously or unconsciously, they have certain expectations for themselves. When they notice that they start to have difficulties in class or may not pass a course for the first time in their academic careers, it is hard to accept that their academic performances are different than anticipated. In these instances, it is almost automatic to feel like a failure. Shame, guilt, and worries arise quickly, which can be hard to bear.

Identity crises can also happen when students are no longer practicing hobbies or studying topics they enjoyed in their country of origin. For example, a student may have been a dancer in his or her country of origin, but has not danced since starting to study abroad. In other cases, students decide to change their career paths due to restrictions (e.g., some research labs will not accept international students due to the sensitivity of research subjects to homeland security) or other considerations (e.g., how easy or difficult it is to find a job in the field as an international student).

Some cases of identity crisis involve students developing new understandings of sexual orientation and gender issues after living in a more liberal environment or being exposed to new knowledge and facts; in the PSU study, 6 percent of respondents noted sexual orientation as a "psychological concern" (Poyrazli 2015). Other cases of identity crisis relate to being "given" new identities (e.g., being a racial minority in their department or on campus). For example, students from Africa talk about their experiences of being treated as African Americans by their peers and experiencing for the first time assumptions and stereotypes sometimes attached to this identity in the United States. Regardless of the cause, old senses of self are often challenged, and new ounces of identity gradually develop as a result of adjusting and adapting. The process itself can be intense and create mental well-being crises.

The crash of expectations can also apply to the adjustment process itself. Many international students hold the belief that the adjustment process is linear; they will struggle at the beginning, but then they will overcome these struggles, feel adjusted, and everything will be great afterward. However, as scholars point out, the adjustment process is not necessarily straightforward (Wang et al. 2018; Black and Mendenhall 1991; Rhinesmith 1975). Instead, it more closely resembles a U shape or a roller coaster with waves of ups and downs. Without this understanding, many international students are caught by the surprise of nonlinear adjustment experiences, and they tend to internalize those "deviated experiences" as their own faults, which leads to intense mental distress.

As a result of these crashes of various expectations and identity crises, many international students report that they feel huge senses of loss. The loss of their family (since family is far away), the loss of familiarity (to their old environment and to their old routine), the loss of confidence (they may suddenly

feel like a child, not knowing how to express themselves or what to expect), the loss of their old notion of self (they may not be the top student any more), and the loss of direction (not knowing where they will be after graduation since it is uncertain whether they will find a job in the United States). These layers of loss contribute to worries, doubts, and senses of not belonging.

## **FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS**

A serious challenge that many international students face is maintaining long distance relationships with their family members, partners, and in some instances, their spouses and children. In the PSU sample, 23 percent of international students reported family concerns and 15 percent reported relationship problems. For married international students, this rate rose to more than one in four (Poyrazli 2015). This contributing factor of poor mental health is amplified among international graduate students.

Many international students mention that they come to their new institution with a mission from the family—staying in the United States after graduation. This mission may align with their own goals, but not always. Students feel stuck between following their own hearts and fulfilling others' wishes. This struggle may complicate the dynamic with their family members, which makes it hard for them to tell their family about their true thoughts, feelings, or difficulties, let alone ask for support and help.

International students often choose not to disclose their challenges to their family members for a variety of reasons: (1) they do not want family members to worry; (2) their family members may not be able to relate to their challenges; and (3) they think their family members cannot give effective advice because they are not familiar with the host environment. It is common for international students to note that their families think they are having fun and living a good life, while the truth is that they are suffering, failing, or feeling confused and desperate. Struggling with long distance relationships can further contribute to strong senses of loss, loneliness, and isolation, which in turn fuels mental distress.

## **FINANCIAL INSECURITY**

International students are not eligible for federally-funded or most privately-funded financial aid, which limits their options for financial security while they study abroad. A survey of international students at a Minnesota university revealed that almost 60 percent of respondents experienced stress related to finances in the past year, by far the most commonly noted factor (Johanson 2010). Also, being informed that many positions or companies do not consider international students as candidates when they apply for jobs can be devastating to international students. The limitation on job options, extra requirements on documentations, and limited financial support fuel insecure feelings.

## **CONCLUSION**

Understanding the factors that often contribute to mental health challenges faced by international students lays the foundation for advisers and other professionals to best address these needs. Isolation from family or U.S. peers, intense or extended distress from culture shock, and various insecurities can all exacerbate poor mental health. (Additional cultural contributors are discussed in the next chapter.) Moreover, language and communication barriers can make it difficult for international students who need or want help—either in the form of counseling or dependable social networks—to receive it.

The rest of the chapters in this volume approach these challenges through various angles, examining opportunities to either mitigate mental health issues through preventative measures or connect students already experiencing crises with the help they need.

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## Chapter 2

# Common Factors of Challenges for East Asian International Students and How Professionals Can Help

By Justin A. Chen and Tat Shing Yeung

The mental health struggles of East Asian international students, particularly those from China, have become well-known among both the general public and academics. High-profile suicides have galvanized a discussion about the unique challenges that accompany study abroad, particularly when combined with cultural factors that may exacerbate feelings of stress and isolation. Given (1) the prevalence of mental health challenges among international students from East Asia and (2) the high enrollment rates of students from East Asia in U.S. universities, focused discussion of common contributing factors and recommendations for addressing them may be particularly helpful for international student advisers at U.S. colleges and universities.

This chapter, which focuses on East Asian international students, briefly reviews what is known about the rates of depression and other concerning mental health indicators in this population and delves into some of the proposed factors that lead to elevated rates of psychiatric problems, including family expectations and cultural stigma. It offers practical tips that educators can use to address these challenges on campus.

## PREVALENCE OF DEPRESSION AMONG EAST ASIAN INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Research has consistently shown that East Asian international students exhibit higher rates of depressive symptoms and suicidal thoughts compared to both white U.S. students and Asian students who do not travel abroad for their studies (Chen et al. 2015; Iwata and Buka 2002). Whereas the general rate of depressive symptoms among university students in the United States is 17.8 percent (American College Health Association 2018), three recent studies on depression among Chinese and Asian international students reported markedly higher rates of depressive symptoms, ranging from 32.2 percent to 45.4 percent (Wei et al. 2008; Cheung 2010; Han et al. 2013). The higher rates of depressive symptoms among Chinese and Asian international students nationwide raise concerns about their mental health and suggest that different approaches may be helpful when working with these populations.

The next section discusses various cultural factors that may contribute to higher rates of psychological distress among East Asian international students and proposes specific strategies that may help mitigate them. Of note, the issues discussed in this chapter are not exclusive to East Asian students, and thus the advice can be helpful for working with students from a range of cultures who may face similar struggles.

## FAMILY EXPECTATIONS

Many collectivistic Asian cultures emphasize hard work and academic achievement, not only as a personal accomplishment, but also as a family honor (Yan and Berliner 2009). These family expectations may contribute to Asian students striving for perfection. Because the majority of international students

are funded by their families to study in the United States (IIE 2016), they may experience additional pressures to excel or “be perfect” in school to justify the family’s financial sacrifice.

Additionally, traditional Confucian values, which are shared by most East Asian cultures, de-emphasize individual desires, and instead promote the fulfillment of duties and expectations as a demonstration of maturity and filial piety. While there are many strengths to this value system, it may also contribute to additional stress for international students when they travel abroad to fulfill familial expectations. The term “Compensation Syndrome,” coined by the economists McNeal and Yeh (1997), refers to a phenomenon in which parents who feel they missed out on opportunities due to political or historical factors place excessive pressure on their children to succeed academically. For some international students, this phenomenon results in conflict between their need to receive emotional support from their family on the one hand, and a strong pressure to meet their family’s high expectations on the other.

Students caught in this bind may feel compelled to focus exclusively on academic studies, leaving little time for other aspects of their lives considered less important for career success, including socializing with peers, extracurricular activities, or maintaining healthy habits, such as exercise, diet, and sleep. Though perhaps less immediately tied to academic or career advancement, these neglected priorities are well recognized to contribute to emotional wellness and long-term sustainability. Many international students from collectivist cultures also avoid seeking help from family or acknowledging problems so as not to cause disappointment or shame. These students may instead choose to keep problems to themselves and internalize their stress, contributing to depression, social anxiety, hopelessness, and suicidality, which are all mental health problems observed more commonly in students from East Asian backgrounds in the United States.

Placing a premium on separation and individuation from students’ families in the service of their maturation and development has long been a guiding principle in Western psychology...However, [by] reflexively privileging the goals and desires of the individual at the expense of familial well-being and harmony, [professionals who work with international students] run the risk of working from a frame of reference that implicitly defines healthy development in terms of a single set of cultural values.

—Richard J. Eichler, PhD, executive director of counseling and psychological services, Columbia University

In our experience leading talks and trainings for high schools and universities throughout the United States on the topic of international student mental health, educators and staff often report frustration with the family dynamics of their East Asian international students. For example, a common complaint is that students are unable to identify their own interests or motivations for pursuing a particular major, instead meeting their parents’ wishes. While such frustrations are understandable, it is important to recognize the deeply rooted cultural narratives that influence the decisions of these students, and to attempt to bridge the gap with empathy and curiosity.

### Checklist for Navigating Family Expectations

**Help students understand and manage self- and family expectations.**

It is not an easy task to get used to life in a new country. Adjustment takes time, and it is normal for international students to experience academic setbacks in the beginning. Educators should remind both international students and their families to manage their expectations and avoid com-

paring students' academic results in the United States to their academic results back in their home country or to other international students' achievements. Students are likely to benefit from hearing the experiences of older students to help normalize the tensions and conflicts they are experiencing.

✓ **Consider improving orientation materials for families back home.**

Family members may promote a view that students should consider themselves fortunate to even have the opportunity to study overseas and subsequently de-emphasize the difficulties involved. Orientation materials, including in-person or web-based presentations (preferably delivered in the family's native language), can help bridge this gap. Helpful topics include cultural adjustment, providing emotional support, and the considerable differences in U.S. pedagogical styles compared to other countries.

✓ **Encourage students to talk to their families about both the good and the bad.**

International students and their families need to understand that living in the United States is very different from what they have seen on television or in movies. Students can be advised (preferably by older international students) that being honest about their positive and negative experiences in the United States, such as bad grades and feeling lonely, will help their families understand their true daily lives and make it easier to seek help when problems arise. This may be a particularly challenging message to deliver to students from East Asia, given the Asian cultural value of "saving face," but it is nevertheless important to normalize these types of discussions before serious problems emerge. At the same time, families will also benefit from hearing examples of students who actually achieved greater success by recognizing their own struggles and limitations and seeking the appropriate help.

✓ **Provide training and education to staff and faculty to help bridge cultural divides.**

As mentioned above, a lack of cultural understanding can lead to frustration among faculty, staff, and students. Consider providing training or continuing education programs to all educators who interact with international students to help them understand the role of education in traditional Asian cultural contexts. Support educators as they explore students' experiences with curiosity and openness by creating a space for educators to share positive experiences and express concerns without resorting to negative judgments or shutting down the conversation.

## ILLNESS BELIEFS AND CULTURAL STIGMA

Culture shapes people's views on mental health and illness. European and North American cultures have been described as individualistic and therefore more concerned with the psychological well-being of the self. In contrast, Asian cultures have been described as collectivistic and possessing a holistic view of the body and mind. These cultural variations result in different emphases in terms of personal versus group identities, priorities, and self-disclosure.

Many Asian cultures have traditionally equated mental disorders with severe illnesses, such as schizophrenia. Seeing a psychiatrist may mean admitting to a diagnosis of a severe psychiatric problem, and having a relative with a psychiatric diagnosis has been shown to have negative implications for potential marriages in China. Research has shown that Asian parents are also reluctant to admit their children's mental health challenges (Kramer et al. 2002). Such denial exacerbates the problems, perpetuates stigma of mental illness, and delays appropriate treatment.



Even those students or families who are willing to broach the subject of mental health may face communication barriers. Asian individuals who suffer from problems like depression and anxiety tend to emphasize physical complaints, such as insomnia, dizziness, or headaches, as opposed to psychological complaints, such as depressed moods (Kirmayer 2001), and U.S. terminology may be unfamiliar or inaccurate to the individual's experience. As a result, students' families or U.S. counselors may not be aware of the nature and severity of their mental health issues.

This struggle is closely related to the lack of awareness of mental health in many Asian cultures. Stigma regarding mental health issues prevents many Asian individuals from seeking professional help. They may find it unfamiliar or difficult to discuss personal issues with a counselor, as such discussion can be viewed as showing personal weaknesses (losing face) and bringing shame to the family. Some Asian cultures believe that the symptoms of mental illness result from weaknesses in personality, which should be overcome with positive thinking and willpower (Leong and Lau 2001). A reliance on alternative approaches may delay effective treatment, leading to more serious problems, such as suicidality.

Again, none of these challenges are unique to East Asian students. Stigma against mental health problems and their treatment is common worldwide, including in European and North American cultures. A concerted approach to stigma reduction and mental health education is likely to help all students, but culturally tailored interventions may increase the success of these efforts among particularly vulnerable groups, as described below.

## CHECKLIST FOR SHIFTING ILLNESS BELIEFS AND CULTURAL STIGMA

**Utilize culturally acceptable terminology that takes into account the stigma of psychiatric issues in this population.**

Some professionals have observed that international students may respond better to the concept of "stress" rather than more pathologizing terminology, such as "depression" or "anxiety." Stress is a cross-culturally acceptable concept that can be used as a bridge with individuals from a range of backgrounds with different illness beliefs. Students can be taught that overwhelming stress almost inevitably leads to problems with sleep, energy, or appetite. The response is not to work harder, but to recognize the problem, take the time to heal, and seek professional help if needed.

**Educate international students on mental health issues.**

As described, international students are likely to hold different views regarding mental illness and are often unaware of the resources and support that they can receive in the United States. It is therefore important to provide them with basic education about mental health, such as symptoms of stress, coping strategies, and resources such as on-campus counseling services and counseling hotlines. It is helpful to provide materials both online and at the counseling center in multiple languages, since international students may feel uncomfortable browsing them in-person and may be unfamiliar with these often stigmatized concepts and the specialized vocabulary that surrounds them. Schools should also provide a list of culturally sensitive or bilingual therapists (where available) to assist international students who prefer to receive services in their native tongue or to work with a provider who has specialized expertise in working cross-culturally.

**Explain the health care system to international students.**

To many international students who have not used mental health services in their home country, the U.S. health care system—which involves insurance, referrals, and mental health professionals

with different titles—can be difficult, even overwhelming, to navigate. An overview of the health care system can help them understand how to seek help within the United States. Keeping in mind the cultural stigma of mental illness, schools and other mental health professionals should also emphasize the confidentiality of receiving mental healthcare services. Many international students have concerns about the implications of seeking mental healthcare on their academic standing, enrollment, and even immigration status.

### STORY FROM THE FIELD

Li is an 18-year-old student from China who recently came to the United States for high school. One day during class, he becomes frustrated and says, “I want to kill myself.” His teacher refers him to the school psychologist for a safety assessment. Li does not understand why he has to see the school psychologist. As the school psychologist shares his teacher’s concern, Li says that he used to make the same comment in China, but no one took it seriously. The school psychologist explains that suicidal comments are taken seriously in the United States. Li apologizes and says he never seriously planned on attempting suicide. The school psychologist teaches him language he can use to express his frustration as well as strategies he can use to cope with his frustration.

This scenario highlights the different language and attitudes around mental health between cultures. Even though in this instance the student was not in serious danger of suicide, his instructor made the right call to refer him to a mental health professional. It is better to be safe than sorry. Li also received some mental health training and language that can help him more effectively and precisely communicate his struggles in the future.

In summary, it is widely accepted that East Asian international students experience significant mental health challenges. Multiple factors contribute to this problem, including unique cultural influences that shape academic expectations, illness beliefs, and willingness to disclose problems and seek help. While there is no easy fix, some basic education for students, families, and educators can help foster understanding and empathy from both sides. Ultimately, we hope that students will feel empowered to seek the help they need, and campuses will feel equipped to provide it.

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## Chapter 3

# Connecting International Students to Counseling

By Xuhua Qin

As previous chapters have established, many international students face a multitude of stressors and mental health concerns that may warrant help from a professional counselor. However, numerous studies show that international student populations underutilize campus counseling services and seek professional help at lower rates than their domestic counterparts (Poyrazli 2015; Kambouropoulos 2015). For instance, a study of international students at an Australian university reported that only 22 percent of international students who committed suicide sought mental health services in the weeks prior, compared to 57 percent of domestic students (Crace 2019). Also important, international students are more likely to consult individuals with whom they regularly come in contact—such as advisers, professors, and friends—for support with mental health issues, rather than going directly to counseling centers (Poyrazli 2015), and are more likely to be connected with counseling services through these alternative support networks.

Advisers and other campus personnel may face uphill battles to connect international students with counseling services—and are likely to be the first line of defense as international students commonly turn to such individuals in times of crisis. Therefore, advisers, staff, and faculty benefit from having a toolkit of advice for better aligning referral processes with the needs of the international students they serve. This chapter presents best practices for connecting international students with counseling on or off campus.

Although there are more and more international students in the United States, some teachers may not have previous experience working with them or understand their needs because of their linguistic, cultural, and adjustment challenges. As mental health professionals trained in cultural sensitivity and competency, we may need to act as cultural brokers and provide consultation to teachers and even family to bridge the gap in expectations. —Psychologist

## NOTICE AND REACT TO CONCERNS

I lied in bed for days, did not even go out of my room. But no one knew, or at least, no one asked where I was and how I was doing. Maybe, they did not care at all, or they never really knew that I existed. I was so invisible. I really wished someone may notice that I was not in the class, or care enough to look for me. I think it would have made a difference. —International student

Due to their frequent interactions, professionals who work with international students are likely to notice or hear when international students are dealing with difficulties. It is important to take the first step and ask students directly about perceived concerns. Many international students who receive counseling indicate that when they struggled by themselves, they felt that nobody really cared or even noticed when they were absent. Therefore, asking does make a difference. Do not let the worry of being intrusive or being offensive get in the way of this important intervention.

When asking students about their difficulties, keep in mind that a lot of students (especially students from Asia) may feel more comfortable talking about physical concerns, rather than emotional concerns (Wang et al. 2006); however, this does not mean that they only suffer from physical conditions. Frequently, physical symptoms are indicators of emotional distress, so be attentive to these descriptions and do not automatically dismiss them. As mentioned in previous chapters, international students whose first language is not English may feel it is more acceptable to start by complaining about physical conditions or lack the vocabulary to talk about their mental concerns. If it is unclear whether the student needs to be referred to counseling or other resources, such as academic or medical intervention, consult on-campus counseling centers. They can usually direct students or staff to appropriate resources.

## ADDRESS MYTHS

You know, in my country, all records, even like what I did in kindergarten, will be kept throughout my life, and will follow me to any new school or later to the company I work for. I don't know how these counseling records will impact me here or even later. —International student

After recommending that a student connect with counseling services, address some common myths with the student. In one study that investigates the barriers that hinder international students from seeking counseling services, the most common concern expressed by international students was “confidentiality issues” with one-third indicating this was a barrier for them (Kambouropoulos 2015). Given that many international students are concerned about whether the information they share in counseling will be put on their records or affect their immigration statuses, it is important to explain confidentiality guidelines, emphasizing that a visit to a counselor will not affect immigration status and no information will be shared with international student offices, academic departments, parents, or others. Contrarily, when a student would like to release certain information to a particular person, the student must sign a written release form.

I thought I am strong enough to handle this by myself. I did not want to admit that I am so weak now. —International student

I thought about coming to counseling for a long time, but I cannot even express my simple thoughts in classes. How can I describe all these complicated feelings in English? It is really nice to know that you work here, so that I can speak Mandarin. Such a relief! —International student

Another common myth is that seeking counseling means being weak. It will be helpful to challenge this myth by emphasizing to the student that going to counseling is taking a proactive approach to manage challenges, which is considered a sign of strength.

If the student holds the belief that only someone from his or her home country will understand the problem—a concern expressed by 23 percent of international students, with language issues constituting another 17 percent (Kambouropoulos 2015)—let the student know that every counselor is trained to be open, knowledgeable, and skilled at working with individuals from all kinds of cultural backgrounds. Keep in mind that some counseling services may have counselors who are able to speak other languages

or have cross-cultural experience. It is also recommended that international student offices keep track of counselors that speak other languages for easy referral.

A lot of counseling services on campus have an online list of staff with photos. It may make a difference to show the student the biography of staff online, putting a name and face together, so that the student may “get to know the counselor” and feel more comfortable prior to connecting with them.

Introducing international students to counseling and explaining how it works can help them set realistic expectations. This step is particularly helpful for students who come from countries that do not offer counseling as a common resource. Some sample sentences to use when introducing counseling can be: “Counseling means developing a relationship with a professional and having conversations in a safe environment. Through such conversations, students can gain knowledge about themselves and learn strategies and skills to help them better cope academically, socially, and emotionally.”

## START THE PROCESS TOGETHER

If a student agrees to a referral, be prepared to make the call together in the international student services office. Chances are, students may not actually follow up with the counselor after they leave the office. As addressed in [chapter 1](#), making a call in a second language sometimes can be a daunting challenge. Staff may also choose to walk with the student to the counseling center for the appointment, or invite the counselor to their office for initial connection (if the counselor agrees).

It is important to not assume that international students prefer to meet with a counselor who comes from the same cultural background. Sometimes international students may feel more comfortable meeting with a counselor from United States. Rather than assume, ask the student directly about their preference, if both options are available.

## FOLLOW UP

I went to counseling as you suggested, but it did not help. The counselor just asked me many questions in that meeting. Nothing was solved. —International student

After connecting students with counseling, set a reminder to follow up with them. Ask questions, such as, “How did the visit go?” If the student does not wish to share his or her experience, that is okay too. Ask, “Do you have a follow-up appointment?” It is common for some students to feel that the first meeting did not accomplish anything. In one study, an estimated 38 percent of international students dropped out of counseling after only one session (Nilsson et al. 2008). As a matter of fact, a typical first meeting usually focuses on getting a big picture and background information. It can feel different from regular individual counseling sessions. Encourage students to try out at least three meetings before they make any decisions on whether or not to continue. If students do not “click” with the counselor, most counseling centers will allow them to switch to another one. It is sometimes a matter of match.

Also, it is important to encourage students to attend counseling consistently. Intermittent attendance is like putting on a quick bandage; it may help at that moment, but if a student is looking for more meaningful healing, consistent attendance for treatment is necessary. Of course, some students only

look for temporary management, which is okay. Keep in mind that counseling has short-term and long-term formats.

Pursuing counseling is personal and voluntarily, and everyone's journey through counseling is different. The bottom line is that counseling cannot be mandated in most cases. But hopefully every encounter with counseling services will familiarize international students with this type of service and open up avenues for seeking help in the future.

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## Appendix 1

# From the Counseling Center Perspective: Ways to Serve International Students

By Monica Thiagarajan, liaison to international students, Counseling and Mental Health Center, University of Texas-Austin

The following suggestions, presented from a counselor's perspective, are intended to help on-campus counseling centers better serve international populations.

- Hire a designated psychologist to serve as the liaison to international students on campus, or identify an on-campus counselor who already has or can develop this expertise. This individual can partner with the office of international students and scholars services to provide programming during the orientation process and throughout the academic year.
- When family and friends are unable to adequately address mental health concerns, international students often turn to faculty members and advisers, who become the point of contact—and one of the most important referral resources for international students. By working closely with these faculty and staff members, counseling center clinicians can provide consultations, education, and support regarding the signs and symptoms of mental illness within international student populations.
- Partner within different academic departments (e.g., natural sciences, engineering) and student engagement spaces (e.g., multicultural and engagement centers, gender and sexuality centers, student services) to provide counseling in spaces that can be more accessible and less stigmatizing to international student populations.
- Provide mental health services in languages with which international students are most comfortable expressing themselves. Recruit clinical staff and trainees that are proficient in conducting therapy in languages other than English, based on the linguistic makeup of the institution's international student population. Group efforts, such as a Spanish-speaking support group, are great options for making these resources available to as many students as possible.
- Collaborate with the medical staff at the university health services by integrating mental health treatment into primary care. If a university physician comes across an international student whose symptoms are likely to have originated from psychological issues, he or she should refer the student to meet with a counselor or other professional who is able to provide therapy in the medical unit.
- Finally, internet-based guided interventions and online assistance for various psychological concerns should be provided through the counseling website. This is a successful approach to reach international students who may not feel comfortable requesting services directly, or would like to explore self-help options before accessing treatment.



## Chapter 4

# The Role of Insurance When Dealing with Mental Health Issues Affecting International Students

By Jennifer Frankel

Medical care in the United States can be confusing, and many international students do not fully understand the need for, benefits of, and costs associated with health insurance. Students who need counseling or other mental health services during their time in the United States may need to quickly comprehend the complexities of the U.S. health care system and their own insurance coverage. International educators may be involved in evaluating the insurance coverage for students if they are charged with finding a suitable group plan or asked to provide guidance for students choosing their own plan. Because insurance responsibilities at the institutional level can vary depending on the college or university, international students and advisers will need to understand how international health insurance policies work and what they cover. For example, not all insurance plans automatically include mental health coverage, making it of paramount importance to know exactly what is covered so that students can be prepared during their time in the United States.

This chapter will explore these themes in greater detail by examining plan administration, on- and off-campus counseling centers, benefits, exclusions, eligibility, and the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA) as it relates to the confidentiality of students' medical information.

## ADMINISTRATION OF INSURANCE

In many cases, a university's office of international student and scholar services (ISSS) is tasked with arranging, managing, and overseeing the health insurance plans for international students on campus, but each school may handle this differently. Depending on the university, the insurance can be overseen by the student health center, risk management, athletic department, or even the admissions office. In any case, the office in charge of the insurance policy must work with the other offices on campus to ensure that the university's insurance plan requirements are well suited to meet the needs of their international students. These offices can also serve as great resources to help decipher plan benefits and exclusions and even work out the logistics of billing to ensure a smooth process for all parties involved.

Moreover, some schools mandate a single insurance plan for their entire student population (including both domestic and international students), while others provide a separate plan or policy for their international students. In both cases, schools may offer a waiver option depending on alternate insurance coverage students may have through a government-sponsored scholarship, employer group plan, or other individual insurance plan. Other schools, however, do not have a group plan in place and either require students to purchase and maintain a certain level of coverage during their studies or make health insurance coverage optional. Even if a school has a comprehensive group plan for all international students, they may still find that there are subpopulations (e.g., OPT students, exchange students, visiting scholars, or dependents) who are not covered under their group plan and need to enroll in an individual plan.

Depending on the institution and which department handles the administration of the insurance plans, advisers may be in a position to shape the insurance plan on campus or empower students to ask the questions that will help them determine in which insurance plan they should enroll. This can prove challenging if advisers are not familiar with the insurance plans, policy wording, or the medical history and needs of each individual student. For this reason, establishing a relationship with one or more insurance company can be helpful so that advisers can learn about the intricacies of each plan or are able to put students directly in touch with subject matter experts.

In addition to connecting with insurance companies, international educators will also want to have working relationships with the on-campus counseling center and off-campus therapists (especially if the school does not have a counseling center). Since the ISSS office can be the first place students go for help, international student advisers should be ready to answer the following questions:

- Does the counseling center or student health center charge for counseling or other services? If there is a fee, will the insurance cover the costs?
- Where can students go off campus? How will the insurance plan work if students go in-network or out-of-network?
- Will the counseling center or medical professional accept direct payment from the insurance company?
- What are the counseling center's hours, where is it located, and how can an appointment be made?
- What should one expect when he or she arrives and when being seen at the counseling center?
- What do students need to know about the confidentiality of medical information?

## ON- AND OFF-CAMPUS COUNSELING CENTERS

Many academic institutions have counseling centers on campus that are available to students for free or at a discounted rate. The availability of these counseling centers will also help determine what type of coverage is required on the insurance plan. To help inform this decision, institutions will need to evaluate how much it costs for a student to be seen at the counseling center, what type of conditions the counseling center is equipped to handle, how long it takes to be seen, and whether counselors receive intercultural training.

Some schools do not have an on-campus counseling center, so they will need to have an insurance plan with rich inpatient and outpatient mental health benefits. However, if there is a counseling center that is free or offered at a reduced rate, the insurance plan may need more comprehensive inpatient mental health care. Even if there is an on-campus counseling center, some schools may find that they want to offer comprehensive coverage for outpatient mental health because their counseling center has limited availability or language support, or simply to give students an increased range of options. Regardless of whether the university or college has a counseling center, it is best to know which psychiatrists, psychologists, and other counselors are in-network, where they are located, and what the plan will cover if a student decides to seek treatment at one of these medical providers.

## UNDERSTANDING PLAN BENEFITS

Insurance is a contract, and as such, schools should read through the complete policy wording to fully understand how the plan works. By reading through the benefit descriptions and exclusions, institutions will be able to better evaluate whether mental health coverage is adequate for the student populations that will be covered.

The most important step in evaluating insurance policies is to read the certificate policy. Do not rely on the brochure. The insurance brochure outlines the basic coverage on the plan, but does not include the full policy wording. Instead, the certificate policy wording (sometimes referred to as the master policy) is the document that has the complete description of benefits and exclusions and is the portion that claims examiners use when processing a claim. The certificate policy will clarify if there are any waiting periods, restrictions on coverage, or exclusions and will specify how much the plan will pay under specific circumstances. These details will allow schools and students to determine adequate levels of mental health coverage.

### Evaluating Mental Health Coverage

The number of international students dealing with mental health concerns has increased in recent years, making this benefit increasingly important—and also more expensive. Because of the costs associated with this benefit, some plans will cover mental health while others may either limit or exclude coverage entirely.

For those plans that do cover treatment for mental illness, coverage may (1) be up to the overall policy maximum; (2) cover a percentage of the costs; (3) limit the number of visits; or (4) cover treatment up to a certain dollar amount. When evaluating coverage, it is important to ask:

- Does the plan cover both inpatient and outpatient mental health treatment? If so, to what extent?
- Will this plan cover prescription medication related to mental health treatment?
- Does this plan cover drug and alcohol abuse treatment?
- Are there any major exclusions (e.g., suicide or self-inflicted injuries)?

### Pre-existing Conditions

A pre-existing condition is a medical condition that started before a person's health insurance plan went into effect. Different plans have varying definitions of what a pre-existing condition is; however, they often include any injury, illness, sickness, disease, or other physical or mental condition that existed at the time of application, or within a certain period of time leading up to the start date of the policy. Even if an insurance plan covers mental illness, pre-existing mental health conditions may be subject to increased scrutiny. For this reason, the way an insurance plan handles pre-existing conditions will directly affect students who are already struggling with a mental health condition.

Insurance plans may cover pre-existing conditions in a variety of ways, including: (1) full coverage with no waiting periods or limitations; (2) coverage for pre-existing conditions after a waiting period, often between 3 to 12 months; (3) coverage for pre-existing conditions up to a specified dollar amount; (4) no coverage at all for pre-existing conditions; or (5) coverage for an acute onset of a pre-existing condition

(a condition that suddenly and unexpectedly reoccurs from a pre-existing conditions). Claims examiners rely on the medical records and claim form to evaluate when the symptoms began and determine whether the condition is pre-existing.

If a student has been diagnosed with a mental health condition before arriving in the United States, taken related medications, or has already seen a counselor, then this could be considered a pre-existing condition. As noted above, both international students and those working with the international students should review the certificate policy to determine how pre-existing conditions would be handled in such cases. If, for example, the plan has a waiting period before pre-existing conditions are covered, the student would be responsible for paying for any related costs until the waiting period has been met. If pre-existing conditions are excluded, then no medical costs would be covered by the insurance plan. If, on the other hand, the policy fully covers pre-existing conditions, then both medication and visits would be covered immediately, in accordance with the terms of the policy.

### **Emergency Medical Evacuation**

Emergency medical evacuation is a benefit that covers the cost for a student to be transported to the nearest facility equipped to handle treatment for a medical emergency. This benefit will cover both ground and air transportation to another facility in the United States, and sometimes will also cover the cost of a medical escort and transportation back to the student's home country. This particular benefit has generally been used for students struggling with severe mental health issues who are unable to continue with their studies and must be transported back to their home country for ongoing treatment. As such, it has proven invaluable to these students and their families.

Evacuation is typically only covered when it is deemed to be medically necessary. The place a student will be evacuated to is often determined by the overseeing physician in agreement with the family. Of course, as with most other aspects of insurance, the plan benefits will affect where and how a student may be evacuated.

### **Emergency Reunion**

Some international student insurance plans also cover emergency reunions, which would arrange and pay for the cost of a family member to be with the student when he or she is hospitalized or medically evacuated. Some insurance plans may require that the student be hospitalized for a certain number of days before the reunion benefit is provided, and other plans require that a student be evacuated before this benefit begins. This benefit will often cover the transportation, lodging, and meals for one relative for a specific dollar amount per day for a set number of days. Again, check the exact wording of the provisions contained in the full policy. This is one of the most important benefits for students who are dealing with moderate to severe mental health conditions, allowing for a family member to be present during their recovery.

### **Putting Coverage into Practice**

Each insurance plan is different, so while this is a broad generalization of how insurance plans work as a whole, it is important to read through the certificate policy wording to fully understand what the plan does and does not cover. Given that there is an inverse relationship between comprehensive benefits

and affordability, students may struggle to find the appropriate balance. It is important that the school set minimum benefit requirements to ensure that students are adequately covered or select plans that have been evaluated and approved by the school. It can be difficult to advise students on which plan to purchase as the needs of students will vary; however, setting minimum standards and/or vetting plans will help to ensure that international students enroll in high-quality insurance plans. Remember, when in doubt, insurance companies themselves can answer benefit questions and will spend the time with students to help them make an informed decision about plan selection.

## EXCLUSIONS

In addition to the benefits, the master policy also lists exclusions. Reading through the exclusions is often more important than the benefits, because any condition listed as an exclusion will not be covered under any circumstances, regardless of what is described elsewhere in the master policy. Here are some of the common exclusions that can impact the mental health coverage that a plan offers:

### Drug and Alcohol Abuse

There are two common exclusions related to drug and alcohol abuse. First, international student insurance plans may exclude any coverage for drug or alcohol treatment, even if the plan provides mental health coverage. Separately, many plans will exclude coverage for any injury or illness that arises when the student is impaired by drugs or alcohol, since the student arguably played a part in their own injury. For example, if an international student is driving a car and collides with a tree, injuries would not be covered if the international student were under the influence of alcohol. Few international student insurance plans would cover the student's medical cost if the student were taking drugs or drinking above the legal limit. The determination of intoxication would be based on medical and police reports.

### Self-Inflicted Injuries

Many insurance plans do not cover self-inflicted injuries. If self-inflicted injuries are indeed listed as an exclusion, any medical treatment related to recovery (both mental and physical) would not be covered by the insurance plan, and the costs incurred as a result of these injuries would be the responsibility of the student or the parents.

### Suicide

As with self-inflicted injuries, many international student insurance plans exclude coverage of treatments related to an attempt on one's own life and/or death resulting from a suicide. If listed as an exclusion, medical expenses for treatment after an attempted suicide would therefore be the responsibility of the student or the family, and the emergency medical evacuation (transportation to a facility equipped to handle treatment) or repatriation of remains (transporting the body back to the student's home country) would also not be arranged or covered.

## STORY FROM THE FIELD

*A crucial aspect of dealing with mental health and international students is knowing what to do before it happens. This includes understanding how students' insurance plans work to cover mental health. The following success story highlights how effective communication and strong understandings of insurance benefits can lead to the best outcome in a difficult scenario.*

A student, Marco, had been homesick and depressed. His roommate came home one day to find him passed out on the floor with an empty pill bottle next to him. He called 911 and Marco was rushed to the emergency room. The doctors pumped his stomach and saved his life. He was then admitted to the mental health floor and put under supervised care.

His international adviser was called the next day and he asked to see Marco. The adviser called the insurance broker to see what limits might affect Marco's treatment.

His mom traveled to the United States using the emergency reunion benefit on Marco's insurance to pay for her airfare and lodging. When Marco was discharged from the hospital, she wanted to take him home, and the doctor and adviser agreed that he needed to be medically transported for observation. They worked with the insurance company and decided that the evacuation was necessary, and that due to the lengthy flight, he would need two professional caregivers to keep him under constant observation.

The coordination of his treatment between the doctors, advisers, broker, insurance company, and family was vital to keeping Marco safe. He is currently home and doing much better.

—Tim Palmer, Palmer Student Programs, LLC

## SPECIAL ELIGIBILITY CASES: SUBPOPULATIONS AND MEDICAL LEAVE

### Eligibility of Subpopulations

When evaluating the suitability of an insurance plan for a given institution, it is important to read through the eligibility wording to determine which populations would be included in the school's group insurance plan.

Universities often interact with populations that extend beyond the primary international student, which can include dependents, visiting faculty, research scholars, and exchange students. The school's group insurance plan may not cover these individuals, and if it does, it can be difficult to enroll if they arrive at different times or require different lengths of coverage.

### Eligibility During Medical Leave

Eligibility can also affect students who are on medical leave, since they are no longer considered full-time students at their institutions. In these cases when students are no longer in active, full-time status, they may no longer be able to stay enrolled on the school's group plan, leaving them in difficult situations.

These eligibility concerns can make it difficult for many advisers to determine, for example, whether international students should stay in the United States or return home to continue mental health treatment. They should take the answers to these questions into consideration when guiding students on these matters:

- What happens if students have to take a leave of absence and their immigration status changes?
- What if students maintain their immigration status but are no longer enrolled in a full-time course load?
- If students are not enrolled in coursework, can they keep their insurance plans?

## HEALTH INSURANCE PORTABILITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY ACT OF 1996 (HIPAA)

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that when it comes to seeking help, international students may be fearful about the ramifications of others finding out. As previously discussed, the stigma of having a mental illness can delay or prevent students' abilities to acknowledge a mental illness or otherwise affect their willingness and openness to seek treatment.

In cases like these, it is important to stress the strict confidentiality that medical professionals must uphold. The most well-known of these is the [Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996](#), which is a set of security standards in the United States that is designed to protect the privacy and security of health information. It restricts what medical information can be given out and to whom, as well as how that information can be disclosed. HIPAA ensures that the information given at a provider's office, whether at the counseling center or off-campus therapist, is strictly confidential and cannot be accessed unless explicit consent has been given by the patient. Most providers and insurance companies have an authorization form that would need to be completed by the patient (student) before information could be disclosed.

While this can be comforting to some international students, it can also present challenges to those whose first language is not English or for students who come from countries where no similar laws exist. HIPAA standards can make it especially difficult for international students who are trying to get medical records released or who are trying to get claims paid.

International educators can help prepare students by explaining what HIPAA is and why it exists, as well as how it may affect them while they seek care and afterward. Since HIPAA release forms can be confusing, the insurance company or providers' offices can provide sample forms. As with all other aspects of health insurance and medical care, encourage students to ask for help if at any time they feel confused or overwhelmed.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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## Chapter 5

# Sexual (Mis)conduct and How Professionals Can Help International Students

By Cory Owen

The #MeToo movement has brought sexual assault to the forefront of the news. While sexual misconduct has always been a societal issue, never has it had such a center stage for discussion at the national level. According to the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, sexual harassment complaints rose more than 12 percent in the last year and this jump has been attributed to the #MeToo movement (Wiessner 2018). College women in particular are at an elevated risk of sexual violence at a rate of three times more likely than the general female population (RAINN). For international students, this conversation can be overwhelming as they adjust to life in the United States. With the discussion around sexual misconduct on the rise in media, this constant barrage of information can trigger a lot of emotional and mental distress for survivors. International students who are far away from their homes may feel even more isolated in these times, which can greatly contribute to deteriorating mental health.

Furthermore, the rising number of Title IX cases and increased reporting need to be taken into consideration from a cross-cultural perspective. While historically Title IX focused on gender equity in college sports, this law has now grown to encompass acts of sexual misconduct. With these regulations changing constantly, it is an important topic to broach with international students to ensure there is not an accidental violation due to miscommunication or cultural misunderstandings. Since Title IX trainings often take place during orientation, it can be overwhelming to an international student to hear about so many regulations shortly after arriving on the new campus. This can create a stressful environment for new students, and therefore should be framed in a way to educate them about expectations.

Reporting is another matter intertwined in addressing sexual assault. A majority of sexual assaults that occur are not reported for a variety of reasons including self-blame, guilt, shame, and fear of retaliation (RAINN). All of these factors can lead to mental health concerns, particularly post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression. Due to cultural expectations, international students may face an additional layer of struggle in relation to reporting sexual assaults. Shame cultures typically focus on being negatively evaluated by others, while guilt cultures focus on being negatively evaluated by oneself (Wong and Tsai 2013). Survivors who come from “shame cultures” may have more complicated reactions to reporting incidences of sexual misconduct, since shame cultures emphasize communal harmony as a whole, rather than standing up for individual rights (Kalra and Bhugra 2013). International students may not want to get the perpetrator in trouble by reporting him or her. If the perpetrator is a fellow international student, there may be a concern of jeopardizing his or her immigration status. Therefore, international students may choose to not report an incident. All of these factors make reporting sexual assault—and mandated reporting in particular—a vital topic for international students’ mental health and safety.

Mental health concerns can arise in consensual sex and dating scenarios, as well. Dating while in a different culture can add stress to this often already nerve-racking experience. While many international student orientations cover these topics, the nuances involved in dating (from hookup culture to dating apps) often make these conversations difficult and ever-changing.

Sex education also varies tremendously from culture to culture. The type of education international students may have received prior to coming to the United States can vary from comprehensive sex education starting in kindergarten to no sex education in school and possibly complete silence on the topic at home. Balancing these disparities while talking to international students about the standards expected in the United States, as well as the available resources when these standards are compromised, can be difficult. However, preparing international students and their advisers for the array of scenarios that might arise will help them maneuver these challenging situations.

This chapter will address the challenges international students face around dating, sex, and sexual misconduct, and tips for advisers to help in these scenarios.

## DATING

Dating norms vary by culture. It is important to explain to international students that U.S. relationships are not always portrayed accurately by Hollywood movies, with dating apps and communication barriers creating alternative narratives to the “perfect” courtship. Cross-cultural communication is often complicated enough without adding an additional layer of slang, memes, and ever-evolving internet acronyms. By introducing another barrier to communication, international students may feel confused and isolated, which can lead to mental health concerns.

Dating is difficult in the best of times, but introducing cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings that leave students mystified. Students who feel misunderstood in dating situations may be traumatized by the incident and isolate themselves to prevent a similar situation from occurring. By living in fear of being misunderstood, international students may face higher levels of anxiety and stress in social situations with students from different countries.

Misunderstandings can also arise in dating situations since gender expectations differ from country to country. Students who choose to date someone from a different culture may be surprised to find out that the expectations of their partner are different than those back at home. For example, students from cultures that are more accustomed to large amounts of public displays of affection (PDA) may face difficulties if their partner is from a culture that tends to be conservative with affection in public. Based on this example, if a couple had one person from Argentina (a culture in which public touching is more common) and another from South Korea (a more reserved culture), there may be confusion about how to approach PDA once dating (Hendricks 2018).

At the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, a student wrote a blog post, [“How to Date at an American College”](#) to help demystify dating for international students. In this post, a vocabulary list was provided with common terms used. Consider partnering with current students on a similar post.

Dating within the LGBTQ+ community can also look different in the United States versus other parts of the world. Even within the United States, there are still many places where members of the LGBTQ+ community may not feel safe or comfortable showing PDA, while other places may seem more welcoming.

Legal ages of consent can be another challenging topic to broach and should be introduced during orientation. There may students on campus who come from countries where the legal age of consent is as

low as 11 (such as Nigeria) or from countries where there is no legal age of consent but where sexual relations are illegal between unmarried people (such as Pakistan) (Murigi 2018). With potentials for vast cultural differences in consent protocol, international students may need help acclimating to U.S. law and custom. Furthermore, students who come from countries where it is illegal to be part of the LGBTQ+ community may need to adjust to life in the United States. In these instances, it may be difficult for them to return to their home country and need to hide a part of their identity, which can lead to additional stress and anxiety.

### Checklist for Helping Students Adjust to Dating in the United States

- Work with current students to facilitate a candid conversation on the topic.**

Organizing a panel discussion with current students, and free of administrators, will make this conversation less awkward as students discuss the intricacies of U.S. dating culture. This can include an overview of common dating apps used, an explanation of the difference between dating apps and hookup apps, and time for a judgment-free zone for discussing dating questions. Often, it is easiest to facilitate questions through anonymous means, such as an online submission form or through index cards. The participating student leaders should be prepped ahead of time by both the international office and the Title IX office in case there are questions that arise that can be triggering for others. It is important to think critically about your own campus culture to determine what is most appropriate. Some schools may benefit from splitting up the conversation by gender, while others may prefer to have a large group discussion.
- Create joint programming.**

In some instances, it may be more effective to provide targeted programming in conjunction with the Title IX office and other relevant offices on campus. For example, consider bringing in a sex expert who can talk about the basics of contraception, which may not be discussed widely in other countries. This can be done in partnership with the health services office, which can also tie in discussions on health insurance and medical care.
- Stress the importance of consent.**

Give specific examples of what consent looks like. Staff should understand the state's laws around consent, and if the institution is bordering other states where students may frequently travel, it is a good idea to be aware of their laws as well. Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN) provides a great [tool to see the laws](#) by state. Incorporate consent into other conversations. For example, if there is a workshop on cross-cultural communication, staff can exemplify how nonverbal communication differs from culture to culture and how that can be confusing when thinking about sexual relationships and consent.
- Discuss LGBTQ+ culture in the United States.**

Take into consideration the cultures from which students are coming and the differences they may encounter in the United States. For example, students who come from countries where it is illegal to be a member of the LGBTQ+ community may struggle to adjust to life in the United States where they see same-sex couples showing affection for each other. However, they will need to adopt respectful attitudes that may not be typical toward members of the LGBTQ+ communities in their home countries. International advisers should plan to address LGBTQ+ culture during orientation to help students prepare for these differences. Additionally, bringing in student representatives

from an LGBTQ+ club may be a good way to help connect international students who are newly exploring their sexual identities in the United States with on-campus communities and resources. Students who are exploring their own identity within the LGBTQ+ community for the first time may benefit from mentoring by older students, staff, or faculty who have had similar experiences or by talking to a counselor. Additionally, the advisers may want to review the article, “Supporting LGBT International Students” (Valosik 2015) in *International Educator* magazine for more tips on supporting students.

### PRACTICE SCENARIO

An international student has been accused of stalking a domestic student. They are both members of the Rainbow Club, an LGBTQ+ organization on campus. The international student has recently come out, and the domestic student was helping him to adjust. In the recent weeks, they were spending less time together, and the international student is hurt because he thought that they were dating. He is confused by the stalking allegation.

What is the role of international student advisers in this situation?

In this situation, advisers should:

- Remind the international student about cultural norms in the United States, since relationships vary from culture to culture.
- Discuss communication styles and boundary formation and include information about high-context versus low-context communication styles as appropriate.
- Partner with other resources, such as the multicultural center, LGBTQ+ center, or counseling services.
- Affirm that a meeting about this topic is not punitive in nature, but rather an opportunity to explore how different cultures approach friendships and relationships.
- In the future, cover these topics during the international student orientation and provide relevant materials. Then share the materials again when having discussions with students. Include relevant vocabulary around dating life such as “hookup culture,” “friends with benefits,” or “Netflix and chill.”

## TITLE IX

While Title IX has been around since 1972, much of the emphasis on campuses has shifted from primarily sports equity to working with campus members around sexual misconduct. Title IX officers have extensive training to help campus personnel understand sexual misconduct and adjudicate any allegations of policy violations. However, there are often cultural contexts that can better equip officers to communicate with international students.

For example, students who come from cultures where corruption among law enforcement is common may not be as trusting of administrators during a hearing. Students who come from cultures where physical abuse is commonly accepted within romantic relationships may not understand why it is anyone’s business what happens in private or may be less likely to report sexual misconduct. Students who

come from countries that tend to have more of a hierarchical view of relationships may not understand when and how to report abuses of power.

Title IX trainings often start with a caveat statement explaining that some of the topics may be “triggering.” While that term is mainstream in the United States, it is possible that not all non-native English speakers will understand it, and international students may find themselves sitting through a session on sexual misconduct that reminds them of a traumatizing experience.

### Checklist for Working with the Title IX Office

**Prepare students beforehand.**

While all students will receive on-campus Title IX training, it can often feel overwhelming to new international students. If hosting an international student orientation, consider having a Title IX officer come to give a general “dating in the United States” talk, which will lay the foundation before international students receive the full Title IX training. As part of that talk, explain what a trigger warning is and how students may opt out of certain conversations that may be difficult for them. Work with the Title IX office to ensure that this trigger warning statement is explained thoroughly and without the use of slang terms. Give ample time for international students to understand the material that is about to be covered and provide an opportunity for those who are not comfortable staying to leave.

Addressing digital safety has become a critical need in the Title IX space, in terms of both prevention and response. Online dating and social media offer abusers many opportunities to cause harm, such as verbal abuse, coercion, and surveillance. This landscape may be even more challenging for international students, given that online platforms and communication around sex and dating vary dramatically across the globe....Administrators should also be prepared to assist impacted individuals. Knowing who can help and how is a great way to ensure that an impacted individual will receive the care they need. Internal partners, such as IT staff and Public Safety, and external partners, such as survivor advocates and law enforcement, are examples of professionals that may be able to provide the expertise and services needed when responding to digital abuse. —Camille Pajor, Title IX coordinator, the Juilliard School

**Provide demographic information.**

Before executing programming for international students, discuss the students’ demographic backgrounds with officials from the Title IX office so that they can best prepare their materials. Advisers know their international populations better than anyone else on campus. Break it down for the Title IX office so that they know the current demographic trends on campus. If there is a large Muslim or Catholic student population, talk to Title IX officers about how religion can play a role in discussions. In this instance, should the talk be separated by gender? If there is a large population from countries where it is illegal or dangerous to be part of the LGBTQ+ population, let Title IX coordinators know so that they can plan their talk with that in mind. If there are graduate students who will serve as teaching or graduate assistants, should the conversation broach power differentials?

☑ **Consider tailored trainings on Title IX and bystander intervention.**

Studies have shown that international students and non-native English speakers may need different types of bystander intervention training. The University of Windsor, for example, is taking strides to do so through the “[International Student Project](#).”

☑ **Train office staff.**

Determine the appropriate amount of staff training on Title IX beyond the basic information presented to all mandated reporters. Have the Title IX office provide general statistics on any trends they are seeing within the institution’s international population. For example, if an abnormally high percentage of cases involve a member of the international community, this may be a sign that more training on Title IX and reporting needs to be done. Proactive measures for bystander intervention training can also help prepare both office personnel and international students with practical ways to intervene and report issues related to sexual misconduct. There are many models of bystander intervention training and short videos to help as part of the orientation program. See the resources below for some possibilities.

## PRACTICE SCENARIO

The Title IX office receives an anonymous report of a Korean student who has bruising around the wrist and cheekbone. In the investigation, she says that she does not want to shame the student responsible for the bruising or the Korean community, and that at home interactions sometimes get physical, especially when alcohol is involved. She reiterates that it is not a big deal and that in Korea, these situations are handled within the community.

What is the role of the international student advisers in this situation?

In this situation, advisers should:

- Provide cultural context for the Title IX office and/or training for working with international students for future incidents that arise.
- Consult with the Title IX office to determine whether they should meet with the student, and if so, whether the meeting should take place alone or with a Title IX officer.
- If meeting with the student:
  - explain the difference between confidentiality and privacy, particularly if considered mandated reporters on campus.
  - explain any immigration status implications that could arise, particularly if the police are involved.
  - explain that while culture is an important component of any interaction, there are certain laws in the United States of which students need to be aware and follow.

## REPORTING

Reporting sexual misconduct is a difficult topic to grapple with, since it is hard to find accurate data on how many cases go unreported. Nevertheless, it is crucial to emphasize the importance of reporting to international students in a context that makes sense for them. International students may have a lot of anxiety about consequences to their immigration status, so reassure them from the beginning that if they are the victim of any sexual misconduct, it will not impact their immigration status.

Since there are legal requirements for mandated reporters, be sure to explain to international students the difference between confidential and nonconfidential resources. Mandated reporters who regularly interact with international students should have a plan for navigating those conversations. Often role-play exercises for the mandated reporters can help prepare them for such discussions. There are also helpful [online modules](#) available through ATIXA: Association of Title IX Administrators.

Guidelines about mandated reporters continue to change, but all advisers should be aware of the campus policies about their roles. Anyone who is deemed to be a mandated reporter, should be aware of the following:

- What needs to be reported?
- To whom does it need to be reported?
- How do one report the information?
- What can be kept private versus confidential?
- What training will mandated reporters receive?

Often, advisers will not be informed if an international student is accused of a Title IX violation since the cases stay confidential. If an international student is found to be in violation of the school's policy and if the consequence is a removal from the school (either as a suspension or expulsion), then the adviser may be informed at that time since it will impact the student's immigration status.

Finally, if there are any exchange visitors on J visas, there is the additional 22 CFR 62.13(d) requirement to notify the U.S. Department of State of any investigation, serious problem, or controversy that may involve an exchange visitor. This includes any "notoriety or disrepute" in which the sponsor or exchange visitor may be named a party. This notification must be done "on or before the next business day by telephone (confirmed promptly in writing by facsimile or email)." The U.S. Department of State has provided a [video on incident reporting](#).

## CHECKLIST FOR DISCUSSING REPORTING REQUIREMENTS WITH INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

### Clarify terms and resources.

Create a handout that includes definitions of terms such as consent, trigger warning, and sexual assault, and provide examples to clarify what these words mean. Within the handout, list all the confidential and nonconfidential resources available both on and off campus and clearly explain what the difference is between the two. Having the information online for easy access is help-

ful as well, as demonstrated by Monroe Community College’s page on “[SUNY Definitions for Sexual Misconduct](#).”

☑ **Empower the survivor.**

Survivors of sexual misconduct need to be empowered in order to help give them a sense of control. Use validating and empowering statements such as, “I believe you,” “It’s not your fault,” or “I care about you and am here to listen or help in any way I can.” RAINN provides a page on “[Tips for Talking with Survivors of Sexual Assault](#),” which can be a helpful tool. Cultural norms should also be taken into consideration if an international student is reporting an incident, particularly in the sense of power dynamics. If the student views staff members as authority figures who must be listened to, the staff member should be extra sensitive and give options, rather than tell the student what to do. If they are mandated reporters, let students know before they disclose, but also empower them to know their reporting options.

☑ **Know the amnesty policy.**

Many schools have adopted an amnesty policy regarding the use of drugs or alcohol when reporting any type of sexual misconduct. Having an amnesty program may lessen the fear that international students face when deciding to report an incident, particularly because they may be concerned with their immigration status. Knowing that they will not face any conduct consequences for drinking or doing drugs can help ease their concerns.

## PRACTICE SCENARIO

An international student comes to the international student office and seems upset. When the adviser asks what is wrong, the student admits to having been abused by a romantic partner. When the adviser explains that he is a mandated reporter and must inform the Title IX office, the student immediately backtracks and says that it was a joke.

### **What is the role of international student advisers in this situation?**

In this situation, advisers should:

- Explain the mandated reporter role as soon as they are aware that a conversation may need to involve the Title IX office. Students may lose trust in advisers or the international office as a whole if this role is not made clear beforehand.
- Work with the Title IX office on a script to explain the role of a mandated reporter. Here is a sample script:

Before you go any further, I want to let you know that I am a mandated reporter for the school. That means that if I am aware of any type of sexual misconduct, I am required to report this to the school. I want to support you and am happy to provide you with resources, particularly in regards to the Title IX process on campus, but need you to know that if you share certain information with me, I will need to include others in this conversation. Please note that no matter what, any conversation you have with me will be considered private, though I cannot guarantee confidentiality. If you’d like a confidential resource, here are some people you can talk to who can remain confidential: [counseling, health services, etc.].



## PRACTICE SCENARIO

An international student has been found in violation of the Title IX policy and has been expelled from the school. The student sends the adviser an email requesting that instead of SEVIS termination, the adviser transfers their record to another school. The student provides an acceptance letter and transfer release form.

### What is the role of international student advisers in this situation?

In this situation, advisers should:

- Prioritize establishing an institutional policy on termination dates, if one does not already exist.
- Ensure that the office is always informed about suspensions and expulsions in a timely manner. Often, international offices have internal mechanisms, such as a letters from the dean's office, to signify the last date of attendance at the institution.
- Review information from U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement about [determining termination dates and reasons](#) (Note that according to [8 CFR 214.2\(f\)\(5\)\(iv\)](#), students who fail to maintain their status are not eligible for any grace period.)

## CONCLUSION

Sexual misconduct impacts international students in a variety of ways. While some scenarios may be due to cultural misunderstandings, the Title IX process for each institution often has very stringent rules on investigations. It is important to educate international students about the rules within the institution and the United States to ensure that accidental violations of the policy do not occur. By partnering with the Title IX office to create culturally appropriate content for your campus, some difficult situations may be avoided. Nevertheless, if an international student is the victim of sexual misconduct, having trained advisers on appropriate language, understanding their roles as mandated reporters, and knowing their campus Title IX policy will ensure that the student receives the best care possible.

## RESOURCES

Association of Title IX Administrators: "[Mandated Reporter Training for Employees: Reporting Sex/Gender Discrimination, Harassment and Campus Crime](#)"

Blue Seat Studios: "[Tea Consent](#)"

The Ohio State University: "[Who Will You Be?](#)"

One in Six: "[Survivors of Sexual Trauma Reveal an Important Truth](#)"

[Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network \(RAINN\)](#)

RAINN: "[State Law Report Generator](#)"

RAINN: "[Tips for Talking with Survivors of Sexual Assault.](#)"

SoulPancake: "[The Bystander Effect: The Science of Empathy](#)"

Office for Civil Rights: “[Title IX and Sex Discrimination](#)”

The University of Windsor: “[International Student Project](#)”

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## Chapter 6

# When a Mental Health Crisis Hits

By Patricia Burak

The office of international student and scholar services (ISSS) is often the first resort for both institutional and community support when a critical situation related to the life, health, or well-being of an international student comes to the attention of faculty, fellow students, landlords, or others connected with the student. Well-structured institutional teams and other offices often rely on ISSS professionals' cultural competence, regulatory expertise, and "insider" knowledge and relationships for efficient responses to mental health crises. Close collaborations with on- and off-campus teams provide opportunities for fluid and comprehensive management of crises.

This chapter discusses the roles and responsibilities of international student advisers in times of mental health crises. It also offers practical guidelines and advice for preparing for such crises. Suicide—similar in nature to crisis scenarios, but different in demands and goals—is discussed in [its own chapter](#). Other incidents, such as murder, death by accident, rape, a missing student, abuse, weapon possession, drug abuse or dealing, and catastrophic natural disasters, might activate similar crisis responses.

## THE ROLES OF ISSS PROFESSIONALS IN RESOLVING MENTAL HEALTH CRISES

The ISSS adviser carries the reputation of the institution on his or her shoulders and represents to students and families a source of guidance and connection that they need to resolve crisis situations. Therefore, the ISSS professional dealing with a mental health crisis should be well aware of the related logistics. A few such issues include:

- health insurance (see [chapter 4](#));
- medical evacuation;
- parental visitation;
- possible legal consequences for actions taken by the student while under mental duress;
- immigration status consequences of a leave of absence or dismissal from the institution;
- early lease terminations;
- and options for storing, selling, or shipping an automobile.

The success of ISSS intervention in mental health crises is contingent on the trust developed between the student, the community, the institution, and the student's family. This trust needs to be developed from first contact with the student and his or her family, and cultivated throughout their time at the institution.

Secondly, in times of crisis, ISSS advisers often serve as bearers of news and communication liaisons. Considerations should be made as to the extent to which the privacy of the student must be protected versus the need of the student population, family, and community to know certain details, especially when a situation results in the student's prolonged absence from campus, his or her living situation, and the cultural community. Campus communication policies provide guidance, but experience, student

expectations, and personal concerns also can influence specific instances. Providing a sense of support, caring, and proactiveness will often suffice in place of specific information when privacy is the priority. The ISSS office is often viewed as the quintessential support base for international students, and confirmation from an ISSS representative that students have been well cared for, that they are in contact with those they need to be in contact with, and that advisers will remain in the loop and provide support as long as they need to will often suffice. Students, and the community, generally respect the need for privacy and advisers' respect for the individual should typically outweigh the "need to know."

ISSS advisers manage much of the communication between the networks through which crises are handled. They should have trustworthy, up-to-date telephone numbers of relevant contacts at their fingertips at all times (including personal cell phone numbers of all essential personnel, such as the dean of students, chief of campus safety, director of counseling services, chapel resources, director of residence life, and dean of graduate study). Pivotal contact information includes:

- sponsor information (24/7 access) if student is sponsored (e.g., a Fulbright scholar);
- embassy and consulate information in the United States;
- U.S. embassy and consulate information in the student's home country;
- local hospital and psychiatric care (24/7 information numbers);
- and reliable translation/interpreting services. (It is unwise to use students for translating or interpreting unless absolutely necessary; trusted faculty or administrative staff should be present in-person or on the phone during interactions if professional translators or interpreters are not available)

Establishing contact with the following networks can also be helpful for social or cultural support in times of crisis:

- student groups with which the individual is affiliated;
- social community groups that are connected with the student's ethnic and cultural background and can offer support, especially in the case of a family visit;
- religious or faith communities familiar with the background of the student and family.

Advisers should keep exact logs of all communications related to the case, including dates and times of contact. Names, positions, phone numbers and emails, and relationship to the case should be recorded for each exchange with an involved party, such as the head nurse at the psychiatric emergency room, campus safety, the deputy at the police station, the counseling center, the student's roommates, or the student's family members. Document phone calls, in-person discussions, and emails that inform decisions, so that all actions taken can be easily validated to the institution's administration. This log can be used to foster institutional support by keeping the communications open, especially with the institution's crisis management team. Advisers should carry this log at all times and keep both electronic and paper versions. In general, each log should include:

- student's official name that appears on his or her passport (as some students adopt "Western names"), school ID number, contact information, insurance information, and faculty adviser if applicable;

- parents' or guardians' names, contact information, native language and English language proficiency, best times to contact (factoring in time differences), and passport information if they will be traveling to campus;
- time, date, name, response, phone number or email used, result of discussion for each communication with or attempt to contact an individual related to the case.

## CHECKLIST FOR HELPING DURING MENTAL HEALTH CRISES

### **Gain a larger picture of the situation.**

To prepare to meet with a student when a potential crisis comes to light, advisers should review all institutional records to which they have access. These records include judicial, academic, residential, and conduct documentation. Make copies and create a file with all information relevant to the student. Though advisers may not be granted access to some of these records, they can offer background information to the providing offices (e.g., the counseling center) and invite them to “connect the dots” in order to find the best way to help the student.

### **Locate and contact student.**

When students may be dealing with mental health crises, dangers to themselves or others, or missing, it is important to establish contact with them. Attempt to reach them by email, text, and phone. If there is still no response, advisers should contact the local hospital or comprehensive psychiatric emergency program. Due to HIPAA regulations, hospital workers cannot share if a student is hospitalized, but if advisers assume that the student is there, they can ask to visit and will be advised as to whether or not this would be possible.

### **Arrange for 24/7 support, if necessary.**

In some cases, such as when the student lives alone off campus or in university housing during vacation periods when roommates and other residents are away, it may be necessary to arrange for 24/7 support. Friends or fellow nationals can schedule 24/7 “buddy” support so that the student is never alone. This is especially helpful when language barriers might present problems for the student who is suffering from mental health problems. Resources might also be found within the academic units, especially for graduate students who form close, supportive relationships with fellow students, lab partners, and officemates. Academic advisers often know the personal networks of PhD students, and might be a resource to call on for suggestions.

## CHECKLIST FOR HELPING IN THE EVENT OF HOSPITALIZATION

### **Help students with HIPAA.**

When necessary, aid international students in completing the HIPAA release form. The completed HIPAA release form is necessary to allow medical care providers to release private health information to insurance companies and other health care providers, such as a hospital in the home country. Such information could include diagnoses; medical recommendations; procedures performed or required; prescription information; and personal health data, such as blood type, prescriptions, blood pressure, temperature, and reactions to treatment to date.

☑ **Report incidents.**

If the student experiencing a mental health crisis is sponsored, get in touch with the sponsor as soon as possible. The sponsor may be able to help contact family in the student's home country or arrange agreements for medical reparations. For students with J-1 visas, certain incidents such as serious injury or potential litigations, must be reported. For more information on these regulations, see the [Exchange Visitor Program's website](#).

☑ **Request support of local faith or campus groups with which the student is affiliated.**

These networks can provide comfort and familiarity with the student's home support systems, and members can lend emotional and spiritual support in times of crisis.

As a Franciscan Friar and Catholic Chaplain at a secular university in New York State...my office is frequently a haven for those students in crisis...I offer open, no appointment necessary office hours each week at the university's non-denominational chapel, and quite frankly, I am never alone. That the students feel welcomed and at liberty to share their lives and life concerns openly with me or one of our staff members at our center is my primary concern. —Father Gerry Waterman, Syracuse University and SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry

## CONCLUSION

ISSS staff and other individuals who work with international students and scholars must develop the sensitivity, knowledge, and networks of experienced professionals from whom they can learn to work with international students and scholars at times of mental health distress. These scenarios can happen at small colleges or large universities. They can affect a first-year undergraduate or a PhD candidate. Experienced colleagues in the field are always ready and willing to consult and advise when needed. The first case any ISSS adviser faces will be daunting, or perhaps even terrifying. However, know that sincere efforts, established guidelines and best practices, and experienced colleagues who have tread these paths before have succeeded in supporting thousands of students and scholars through these situations.

## Chapter 7

# Suicide: When an International Student Loses Hope

By Peter Maramaldi<sup>1</sup>

Although it is often not discussed openly, suicidal ideation—thinking about suicide as a solution—is commonplace in large segments of any given population. In fact, suicidal ideation is more of a norm than most people think. In some cases, it may be seen as adaptive and perhaps even as a sign of misdirected resilience. International student advisers should be prepared for suicidal ideation to be part of their students' standard coping repertoire. To help equip advisers to effectively respond to student suicides or attempted suicides, this chapter provides actionable strategies, a list of important questions for assessing a student's risk of suicide, and a case study for practice.

## SUICIDE AS A WORLDWIDE ISSUE

Research indicates that suicide is one of the leading causes of death for people in the United States, especially for college- and graduate-aged students. Statistics provided by the National Institute of Mental Health (2018) report that in 2016, “Suicide was the tenth leading cause of death overall in the United States, claiming the lives of nearly 45,000 people” and “the second leading cause of death among individuals between the ages of 10 and 34.” These statistics, however, may underreport suicide for a variety of reasons. There is a stigma attached to suicide in the West, which may influence reporting. In addition, accidents, the leading cause of death for college-aged people in the United States, may be attributable in part to unknown or underreported suicides.

The prevalence of suicide in student populations has been noted in the United States and abroad. An article published in a Chinese media outlet in 2016 declared a “breaking point” after 22 suicides had been recorded between the start of the academic year and March (Cheung and Chiu 2016). A 2019 *New York Times* article referred to “what some experts are calling a mental health crisis” and cited data from the Center for Collegiate Mental Health confirming that even though college enrollment had increased only 5 percent between 2009 and 2015, visits to campus counseling centers increased by more than 30 percent (Wolverton 2019). However, despite increased focus on student suicide rates and utilization of counseling services, solid data on the number of international students in the United States presenting at hospitals with suicidal intent or attempts, or death by suicide, are not easily accessible. Regardless of the availability of specific figures, it is safe to say that suicide is a concern that international student advisers, as well as any professional working with college-aged populations, must have the tools to address.

## WARNING SIGNS OF SUICIDE

Unfortunately, it is impossible to provide a comprehensive list of warning signs of suicide, since often the general warning signs must be interpreted in the context of the individual experience. The student's stage of development, life history, recent stressors, and adaptation to the host environment and academic culture all should be considered. For international students, the synergistic effects of a series of stressful or painful life events, combined with the pressures of being away from home in a new country, must be considered in the context of known warning signs of suicide. Sometimes, there are no warning

signs and a student tragically is found dead. This, in turn, places surviving students at higher risk of suicide. However, in most cases there are at least some indicators of suicidal intent that can be noticed by a friend, adviser, or other acquaintance.

The range of verbal statements can run from explicit statements of suicidal intent, such as, “I want to die,” or “Soon it won’t matter anymore,” to more subtle or ambiguous expressions like, “I’m tired,” or references to someone else who committed suicide.

Situational clues often include preparations for death. In closing out, people often settle accounts, return borrowed things, write letters, or say goodbyes to significant others. Behavioral clues also may include imprudent or reckless acts, such as self-injurious or abusive behavior, high-risk sexual practices, accident proneness, failure to comply with medical regimens, drug or alcohol abuse, and other acts that lead to the demise of self. Suicidal individuals often have a history of previous attempts. They may have developed a plan or timetable for their suicide. This is why two of the most important questions to ask suicidal individuals are how and when they plan to kill themselves. (See list below for other important questions.) Environmental clues include the nature of the suicidal person’s real or imagined relationships with other individuals, organizations, and groups. Elements of the individual’s environment becoming the source of overwhelming discomfort or pain and can be a warning sign.

The single word that would most likely describe a suicidal individual’s emotional state would be “pain.” Suicidal students commonly express a deep sense of hopelessness, worthlessness, and powerlessness. They are exhausted, feel terrible about themselves, and feel completely incapable of changing their situations. They sometimes experience changes in eating, sleeping, and other regular habits. Their interests may decline in activities that they previously enjoyed, and they may exhibit signs of self-neglect, such as self-starvation or violation of medical regimens. Sometimes suicidal students experience deep sadness, withdraw from people and activities, or experience bouts of anxiety. They also may show increased temper as they find it difficult to tolerate the stressors in their environments. Professionals who work with college-aged students should be trained to notice these characteristics and how to refer students who display one or more to professional counselors.

## RESPONDING TO SUICIDAL IDEATION

The primary action to take when concerned about a student is to ask questions. A checklist of such questions is included in this chapter and should be studied by all international student and scholar (ISSS) advisers well before the need arises. A “cheat sheet” in the appointment record system (electronic or paper) should contain these questions and the answers provided by the student during the in-person or phone exchange.

In providing psychological first aid, it is critical to assure the student that there are ways other than suicide to get out of the pain. Try to frame it as being similar to physical distress; just as one would see a doctor for a broken bone or a high fever, one must see a mental health professional for the type of painful emotional distress preceding suicidal ideation or thoughts. The mere fact that the student is able to talk to someone openly about suicidal intent may be helpful in itself.



## Recognize

The first thing to do is to recognize a student's suicidal ideation. People often have a hunch, a gut feeling, or an impression that a student may be thinking about suicide. Or international student advisers may recognize some of the warning signs mentioned above. Resist the temptation to deny the possibility that a student is suicidal and acknowledge warning signs.

## React

The next step is to ask the student, "Are you thinking about suicide?" The word "suicide" may be an uncomfortable word to say to a student, so practice it beforehand or ask the question in a different way. Questions should be objective, and reactions to responses should be nonjudgmental. Questions designed to assess the lethality of the case and provide the student with a safe place to speak his or her mind are listed at the end of this chapter.

A standard technique in suicide work called contracting can be employed at this time, if appropriate. The theory behind contracting is that the suicidal individual enters into an agreement not to take any self-destructive action without activating a resource, meaning making contact with an agreed upon resource, such as a friend, medical personnel, counselor, or ISSS adviser. The problem is that suicidal people often invent loopholes and break contracts. Regardless, contracts provide the suicidal person with an interpersonal connection and a face-saving means to reach out for help in the future.

## Refer

Finally, if the student is thinking about suicide, the matter must be referred to a mental health professional. The manner in which the referral is made is based on the lethality of the suicide plan. Certainly, the lethality of a case in which a student threatens to jump from the nearest roof is far greater than that of someone who has had repeated thoughts of suicide with no specific plan. In the first case, emergency procedures for life-threatening situations should be implemented immediately. These procedures will be institution-specific and may include campus security, local police, and emergency medical services. In cases with lower levels of lethality, contact a mental health professional immediately. The mental health professional will help decide the appropriate level of response. In the absence of a suicide plan that includes consultation with mental health professionals on or off campus, call the local hospital emergency room, speak with a triage nurse or a psychiatric resident, and ask for guidance.

## IDENTIFY AND ACTIVATE RESOURCES

A suicide protocol should be in place before a crisis event. Educators and administrators with direct student contact should be aware of the protocols and be familiar with the available mental health resources and student counseling programs. Suicide protocols are specific to institutions and their mental health resources. They will vary by country, state, and region. Consult with mental health professionals. Planning can be facilitated through professional contacts to ascertain what systems colleagues have in place. Such a proactive stand will help minimize exposure to the tragedy of suicide and help protect students, institutions, and institutional staff alike. In suicide cases with very acute lethality, logistics become crucial; know how the student will get from the institution to the hospital emergency room. Protocols should include contingencies for weekends and holidays.

## TRAINING

Training builds confidence and competence. The deeper the understanding and familiarity with suicide dynamics and procedures, the more likely suicidal students on campus can and will be helped. Counselors and other services are valuable resources and may be able to provide institutional staff with necessary and life-saving training programs. In the absence of school counseling, mental health providers in the community may provide assistance. Students, too, should receive training on the subject of suicide. Student orientation materials are appropriate media for communicating this important message. They should include public health material about preventive steps in physical and mental health.

Encourage students and staff to notice and report warning signs of suicide to a confidential and non-judgmental resource. Silence is tantamount to being held hostage by suicidal thoughts. Students should not be persuaded by a suicidal friend or roommate that informing others may get him or her kicked out of school. Even if the individual loses a semester or is forced to leave the school, it is better than the alternative.

## CHECKLIST OF QUESTIONS TO ASK A STUDENT WHO MAY BE SUICIDAL

- “Are you thinking about killing or hurting yourself? Tell me about it.”**  
Advisers must be objective and open to hearing what the student says, and ask for clarification in the same manner as they would during any other conversation or interview. React with honesty and sincerity, but do not judge. Ask the student for help with understanding his or her situation.
- “How will you do it? Do you have a plan?”**  
Again, listen carefully and assess the lethality of the plan. Probe and clarify. If the student says that he is going to jump off the roof, ask him if he knows what roof and when. If he says he will overdose on drugs, ask if he has these drugs on hand and when he plans to take them. The idea is to gently get as much detailed information as possible without badgering.
- “How often do you have these thoughts of dying? How long do these suicidal thoughts stay with you?”**  
This question helps determine if this struggle is a pervasive overriding chronic drive to die (high lethality) or a feeling that comes and goes. If a student has these thoughts all day long, the lethality is higher than if the impulses come and go. However, it is important to follow up with questions of the intensity of the suicidal impulse. Low intensity feelings all day may be less lethal than infrequent episodes of higher intensity.
- “Do you know anyone who committed or tried to commit suicide? Tell me about it.”**  
People who had a close relationship with someone who has committed suicide are considered to have a higher risk themselves. Listen carefully to how the student relates to the person who died. This question also opens the door to anniversary dates. Survivors of suicide and other forms of loss often have difficulty during the time of year that the acquaintance died.

☑ **“Have you ever felt this way or attempted suicide before? [If yes] What happened then?”**

If students have a past history of suicide attempts, they are at a high risk. A past history of suicidal ideation may indicate a risk reduced in its present lethality, but increased in its depth of hopelessness. Information about past interventions is critical.

☑ **“Is there anything or anyone to stop you from hurting yourself?”**

This question elicits information about support systems available to the suicidal individual.

☑ **“What has kept you from hurting yourself so far?”**

This question will lend an idea of resources—people, beliefs, or goals and aspirations—that are available to this student.

☑ **“What is in the future for you?”**

The less the person is able to project into the future, the higher the suicide risk and vice versa. In addition, the student’s response may identify some sort of an overwhelming and painful obstacle in his or her path. This is also a way to understand the kinds of goals the person has set.

☑ **“Have you taken any medication, drug, or alcohol within the last 24 hours?”**

The medication question may indicate that the person is under the care of a physician for medical or psychiatric conditions. Compliance with the medical regimen also offers insights into the student’s state of mind. On the other hand, drug or alcohol consumption increases acute risk, as it may impair judgment. The student may also have interactive effects with any prescribed or illicit substances that have been consumed, necessitating immediate medical attention.

☑ **“Have you talked about this with anyone else?”**

If the student says no, ask with whom he or she would want to talk. This question provides insights into the student’s support network and his or her ability or willingness to activate it. It may also provide critical information for the intervention.

## PRACTICE SCENARIO

Jai, a gregarious international student with a promising future, has been talking to friends about his thoughts of suicide after failing a course. The following day, the ISSS office receives a call from a psychiatry resident at the local hospital. Jai is in the emergency room after a suicide attempt.

### **What is the role of international student advisers in this situation?**

In this situation, advisers should:

- Notify the insurance company and obtain a medical release form for the student to sign, so that the hospital can work with the insurance company to arrange medical evacuation and/or parental visitation.
- Plan with the hospital a visit to the student. Be prepared for disorientation or lack of recognition. Bring any familiar information with you: names of parents, roommates, academic adviser. If a language barrier is anticipated, bring an interpreter with you, or ask the hospital to arrange for one to be present.
  - If bringing an interpreter, a faculty or university administrator should be recruited instead of using another student, due to confidentiality. Local community groups might have other professionals who can provide this support.

\*Repatriation for mental health reasons is a positive solution to a suicide ideation case.

## AFTER A SUICIDE: WHAT TO DO

The tragedy and shock associated with suicide will leave many of those affected second-guessing themselves, their actions, and their competency. Every student who is aware of the suicide will be affected on some level. Some will be reminded of past life events of great pain and heartache. Many will have difficulty carrying out their daily activities. Mental health professionals can assist in the development of a postvention response, specific to the situation and the institution to help survivors pushed into high suicide risk. Typically, counselors speak with groups of students, facilitate discussion groups, and are available to meet individually at the students' requests. By these means, at-risk students can be identified, helped, and returned to previous levels of functionality. Institutional staff also should be included in postvention services. The impact of the tragedy is not limited to the student's family, friends, and student body. Staff may need to see a counselor in order to cope with lingering feelings of guilt or other persistent disturbances.

Investigations by local and institutional authorities may put people off, but they must occur. Arrangements for the identification, transport, and burial of the student's remains must be carried out with relative expediency.

## CONCLUSION

The role of an ISSS adviser in situations that anticipate, respond to, or provide closure to a suicide can be the most devastating personal and professional experience one ever undergoes. Preparation and an understanding of when to refer students to trained counselors are essential. Confidence as a source of support for the family, friends, faculty, and university administration will be of enormous benefit. These guidelines are intended to provide ISSS professionals with tools and resources. Experience, sadly, is the only better guide.

## RESOURCES

### [The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](#)

The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention provides information and modules for training on topics including suicide prevention and support groups.

### Education Development Center, Inc. and Screening for Mental Health, Inc.: [“Suicide Assessment Five-Step Evaluation and Triage for Mental Health Professionals”](#)

This resource gives a sense of steps to take with students who may be at risk of suicide and includes recommended interventions depending on risk level.

### Harvard Medical School: [“K10 and K6 Scales”](#)

This resource includes the Kessler 6 and Kessler 10 Scales—to help discern if an individual is experiencing acute psychological distress—translated into several languages. This reference provides a sense of what to look for when determining whether to contact university resources for suicidal students.

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1 Adapted and updated from: Maramaldi, Peter. 1999. “What to Do When an International Student Loses Hope.” *International Educator* 8, 3: 31-34.

## **Part II: Promoting Mental Health Among International Students**

**Chapter 8****Undergraduate Peer Mentoring Programs for Improved Social Support and Mental Health**

By Peitao Zhu

Social support has long been regarded as one of the most important resources for international undergraduate students in facing mental health concerns. International undergraduate students' patterns of utilizing social support seem to parallel their developmental stages. Bhochhibhoya and colleagues (2017) identified four distinct sources of interpersonal support available to international undergraduate students in the United States: (a) *conationals at home*: those living in their home country; (b) *conationals in the United States*: those residing in the United States but originally from their home country; (c) *fellow internationals*: those residing in the United States originally from other countries; (d) *host nationals*: those born and living in the United States. Bhochhibhoya et al. (2017) found that international undergraduate students at different stages of acculturation seem to prefer different sources of support; students tend to rely more on conationals when they first arrived and gradually shifted to host nationals during their stay.

Moreover, international students' preferred source of social support can vary dramatically across different home regions. For example, students from Africa, the Middle East, East Asia, and Southeast Asia tend to have the least interaction with U.S. students, whereas Canadian, Western European, and Oceanian students have the most extensive interaction. Interestingly, although African and Middle Eastern students were found to be the most isolated, few reported that it was a concern for them; in comparison, students from East Asia and Southeast Asia were quite concerned about forging friendships with host nationals, students born in the United States (Trice 2004). It is reasonable to presume that those who have more concerns about not having enough U.S. friends would experience significantly more mental health challenges.

All types of social support (e.g., conationals, host nationals, fellow internationals) seem to contribute positively to international undergraduate students' psychological and sociocultural adjustment. Specifically, international undergraduate students' sense of belonging increases by developing relationships with host nationals, whereas ties with conationals provide emotional support and help them maintain greater identification with their own culture (Smith and Khawaja 2011). In short, international undergraduates benefit from all types of social support and their preferences might change based on how long they have been in the United States.

The following chapter will discuss an alternative peer mentoring model for new international undergraduate students that goes beyond the traditional one-on-one pairing. Rather than presenting a fixed model, it offers several theoretically and empirically informed guidelines for designing and implementing a peer mentoring program in a U.S. university. The goal is to provide an organized, yet flexible framework, which can be further tailored to accommodate the unique needs of various institutions.

## BARRIERS AND RELUCTANCE: A TWO-WAY BRIDGE?

As discussed at length in this publication, international students are often reluctant to take advantage of counseling and other mental health resources for a variety of sociocultural reasons. Although some reasons and responsibilities for international students' reluctance to seek support lie within themselves, the literature often overlooks how the host culture may also contribute to this phenomenon. Lee and Rice (2007) identify an underlying assumption of the literature: international students tend to "bear the responsibility to persist, overcome their discomfort, and integrate into the host society," (388) without examining how individuals and institutions may have perpetuated their isolation and marginalization. In fact, many domestic students, university staff, and faculty may be just as reluctant and unprepared to engage in intercultural contact. A common finding is that international students feel that domestic students are somewhat uninterested in having conversations with them or have negative biases toward them (e.g., Montgomery 2017). International students also experience impatience, microaggression, and sometimes overt hostility from university staff or faculty. Numerous accounts can be found in the literature (e.g., Lee and Rice 2007). These unwelcoming aspects of the campus climate sometimes expose international students to embarrassment, shame, and self-blame, which further leads them to retreat from social interaction. Therefore, an effective intervention program needs to include components that address both the international students and host culture.

## HOW PEER MENTORING CAN HELP INTERNATIONAL UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

The use of peer (student-to-student) mentoring is a long-accepted practice to enhance the first-year experience in undergraduate education and has grown exponentially in recent decades across the United States. While a variety of definitions of mentoring exist, peer mentoring for undergraduate students typically refers to a relationship in which a more experienced student provides advice, support, or assistance to a less experienced student with the goal of improving academic performance, social integration, and personal growth. Peer mentoring has been shown to have positive effects on many aspects of life, such as grades, retention, mentee's sense of belonging, and comfort with the university environment. When comparing peer mentoring to other forms of mentoring (i.e., faculty-to-student), Collier (2017) asserts that peer mentoring is less costly, has greater availability of mentoring resources, and is potentially more effective in certain areas.

Crisp and colleagues (Nora and Crisp 2007; Crisp and Cruz 2009) identify four major benefits of peer mentoring: (1) *psychological and emotional support*: listening, forging mentor-mentee alliances, identifying problems, and providing encouragement; (2) *goal-setting and career paths*: assessment of strengths, weaknesses, and abilities, as well as assistance with career goals; (3) *academic subject knowledge support*: supporting the mentee's academic success inside and outside the classroom; and (4) *role-modeling*: sharing life experiences, achievements, and failures to enrich the mentoring relationship and facilitate mentee growth. Although not specific to peer mentoring, this framework provides a theoretical grounding for designing a peer mentoring program and identifies potential outcomes when it comes to program evaluation.

Most research on peer mentoring focuses on one-on-one models, though this may not be the best model for a couple of reasons. Given that the number of international undergraduate students at large universi-



ties may reach several thousand, it is perhaps unrealistic to recruit equivalent numbers of peer mentors to serve such a large population. More important, peer mentoring that only provides individual-level support is likely to be insufficient in addressing systemic issues and ineffective in engaging advocacy (Lee and Rice 2007).

## A FRAMEWORK OF PEER MENTORING PROGRAMS FOR INTERNATIONAL UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

### Roles of Mentors and Mentoring Programs

The first step in designing a peer mentoring program is to identify the roles and boundaries of peer mentoring. In other words, it is important to clarify what peer mentoring *is* and what it *is not*. Peer mentoring should address some of the following concerns:

- Academic challenges
- Emotional and psychological well-being
- Cultural transitions and adjustments
- Campus and community connectedness
- Career and professional development

Note that language and communication are not on this list. Rather than viewing them as stand-alone categories, peer mentor programs should consider language-related issues (e.g., skills and comfort) as embedded in all categories. In order to address these common needs, it is helpful to conceptualize the roles of individual peer mentors as threefold.

First and foremost, peer mentors are *liaisons* who can connect international undergraduate students with a variety of on- and off-campus resources and support. Peer mentors are knowledgeable about the institutional resources available on campus, including the academic advising office, tutoring and writing centers, student health center, counseling center, international student office, multicultural student center, student assistance office, legal assistance office, residence life, career advising center, and so on. Peer mentors also have knowledge about other types of resources in the larger community, such as ethnic or cultural centers and religious groups. In addition to resources, peer mentors are intentional about fostering cross-cultural interactions for international undergraduate students by introducing mentees to their own friends, exposing mentees to cultural events, and encouraging them to join clubs and student organizations. For example, the peer mentors can take their mentees to the campus involvement fair and introduce them to various student clubs and fraternity/sorority organizations, as most international students might feel overwhelmed about the wide range of student organizations or timid about asking questions. In short, the liaison role aims to enhance mentees' social connectedness and sense of belonging to the community.

Second, peer mentors are also *cultural guides* who accompany international students in their journeys, offering encouragement and advice. Peer mentors are more seasoned cross-cultural travelers themselves and have had successful experiences with sociocultural adjustments. Being cultural guides, peer mentors are role models for new international undergraduate students who might be less skilled in acculturation.

Peer mentors are aware of the common challenges faced by new international undergraduate students. They validate and normalize mentees' struggles, as well as share their own experiences with overcoming these struggles. For example, as making friends with domestic students is a common challenge for international students, peer mentors can share their own struggles and successes in building such connections and suggestions to help the new students navigate these issues. In short, the role of cultural guides is to increase mentees' senses of hope and motivation to adapt to the new culture.

Third, peer mentors are also *facilitators* who assist international undergraduate students in achieving their academic, social, and wellness goals. Equipped with basic helping skills, peer mentors are able to forge trusting relationships with mentees, respect their autonomy and preferences, and attend to their unique needs. Rather than trying to solve mentees' problems, peer mentors empower mentees through helping them identify their strengths, resources, and support systems. Peer mentors are also aware of the acculturation trajectory of international undergraduate students and endeavor to scaffold their assistance according to each mentee's developmental level. For example, for international students who struggle with communicating effectively with their professor due to language difficulties, peer mentors can help the mentees rehearse their conversation beforehand or accompany them to their meetings and serve as an advocate. In short, a facilitator role contributes to more adaptation-oriented actions of international undergraduate students.

Finally, on the program level, an added component of *advocacy* should also be considered. As was evident in the previous discussion, many challenges faced by international undergraduate students, such as marginalization and discrimination, transcend any specific setting or individual interaction. While individual mentors might not necessarily have the resources to engage in advocacy, the peer mentoring program as a whole and the sponsoring office are more likely to affect change on a systemic level. For example, to address the lack of engagement between international and domestic students in the residence hall, the coordinator of the peer mentor program might organize a panel consisting of mentees, peer mentors, domestic students, residence assistants, residence hall directors, and other stakeholders in the community to discuss ways to enhance the sense of inclusion in the living-learning community. These types of efforts are likely to raise awareness of the unique needs of international students to the host culture group and remove systemic barriers for their integration into the community.

## PRACTICE SCENARIO

*It is evident that the characteristics, functions, and boundaries of the mentoring relationship can be quite complex and ambiguous, especially for mentors who are not familiar with cross-cultural mentoring. The following example reflects this issue and demonstrates the need for an ongoing discussion on the nature of mentoring.*

In one of the biweekly mentor meetings, Aaron, one of the mentors who is a senior domestic student, expressed his frustration that his mentees did not seem to reach out to him much. Aaron shared with his fellow mentors that he sent an email in the beginning of the semester to all of his mentees with his contact information and a comprehensive list of resources, encouraging them to reach out to him if they have any questions. Contrary to his expectation, most of his mentees were unresponsive to his email, and the few questions that he received were confined to academic issues. Aaron felt unsure why he had not developed connections with his mentees, especially compared to some of his peers.

### **What might Aaron do to develop connections with his mentees?**

Another mentor, Shiyu, suggested that Aaron reach out to his mentees individually and ask if they would like to share a meal and just hangout. Aaron was surprised by the suggestion and said, “I have never thought of it. I thought we are not supposed to be their friend.” As the conversation unfolded, Aaron was able to realize that he had conceptualized mentoring as taking place in a formal setting, whereas his peers’ experiences revealed that many international mentees are more comfortable with opening up in informal settings when the mentor is casual and personable. The group also came to a consensus that, although mentorship and friendship may have many overlaps, one of the major differences is that mentoring is more intentional in facilitating mentees’ transition and growth in various areas.

## Peer Mentor Selection and Training

In general, in programs designed for international undergraduates, the position of peer mentor is more appropriate for undergraduate students. International graduate and undergraduate students have distinct needs and challenges. The differences in age, academic level, professional experience, and life stage might pose barriers for international graduate students to understand and empathize with their undergraduate counterparts, thus limiting their ability to forge effective mentoring relationship. Moreover, graduate students tend to have a more professionally-focused life and do not necessarily have extensive campus involvement, which might make it challenging for them to facilitate their mentees’ social integration to the community. That said, graduate students with strong qualifications and motivation to provide support should certainly not be precluded from being selected as peer mentors.

Another topic to consider is whether international or domestic students are more effective peer mentors. Although most peer mentoring programs that have been studied paired domestic mentors and international mentees with a focus on practicing English language skills, this practice seems narrowly focused. For example, a critical role of peer mentors is to provide emotional support for mentees who experience acculturative stress. Domestic students who have not traveled internationally might not have the lived experience of culture shock, and thus cannot truly understand what it feels like to be in a vastly

different culture without a safety net. On the other hand, peer mentor programs that exclusively select international students as mentors might miss the valuable cultural perspectives and resources of domestic students who are committed to becoming allies for their international peers. Therefore, it is recommended that the peer mentoring program be open to both qualified international and domestic students.

Once the peer mentors are selected, it is imperative for peer mentors to engage in continuous training in individual and/or group format. The primary goal of the training is to ensure that mentors will stay informed on the most updated information about university policies, resources, and events, and that mentees’ concerns are appropriately addressed. A secondary goal is to provide opportunities for peer mentors to develop their leadership, organizational, and helping skills.

Although the content of such trainings should be specific to the institutional context, a sample training structure for peer mentors is included as a reference for program designers. In this example, mentor trainings are offered biweekly in a group setting in the fall semester. Each training session (except for the initial one) lasts approximately 60 minutes. The trainings are offered in collaboration with relevant academic departments and administrative offices (indicated in parentheses). Learning objectives are determined by the program coordinator in advance of the session and are assessed by pre- and post-session surveys.

TRAINING SESSIONS		
Training	Topic	Guest Speaker
Initial Training (6 hours)	Overview of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ the peer mentoring program</li> <li>■ student employee responsibilities and expectations</li> <li>■ nature of peer mentoring</li> <li>■ foundational helping skills</li> <li>■ campus resources</li> </ul>	
Group Training 1	Case seminar on common mentee concerns	
Group Training 2	Strategies for international students to succeed in a U.S. classroom	Academic support office staff
Group Training 3	Helping mentees feel connected in the residence space	Residence office staff
Group Training 4	Case seminar on common mentee concerns	
Group Training 5	Providing emotional support for mentees and self-care	Counseling center staff
Group Training 6	Culturally responsive mentoring	Multicultural affairs staff
Group Training 7	Reflection, feedback, and brainstorm for next semester	

### Programmatic Activities

Peer mentoring on the individual level should involve direct contact between mentors and mentees, with a focus on addressing the five needs: academic challenges, emotional and psychological well-being, cultural transitions, social connectedness, and professional development. Based on these domains,

each program can further develop a more detailed checklist that is specific to its institutional context. Although not every mentee will request assistance in all areas, the checklist might serve as a reference or roadmap to help peer mentors navigate their work.

Regarding the means of contact, a mixture of face-to-face, email, instant messaging, and telephone interactions should be encouraged. Peer mentors should also diversify their meeting size (e.g., individual and small groups) and settings (e.g., formal and informal) in order to accommodate the various needs and preferences of their mentees. The minimum amount of contact should be determined by the needs, funding, and staff support available.

A wide range of programmatic activities could be implemented according to the students' needs and the institutional context. Rather than prescribing specific activities, this section offers two general recommendations for designing these activities. First, programming should adopt a developmental approach. International undergraduate students' needs for mentoring are likely to parallel their acculturation trajectories, as well as revolve around the university's academic calendar. For example, students tend to encounter significant stress when they are first exposed to interactive and participatory U.S. classrooms and again when they have their first final exams. Therefore, academic-oriented events early on in the semester (e.g., tutoring and writing support) are likely to be beneficial. Moreover, activities that are more cognitively based (e.g., attending a presentation) may be preferred by beginning students, whereas experiential and interactive activities that involve cultural components (e.g., pumpkin carving and apple picking) are likely to attract more attendance later on.

Second, a balanced mix of activities that foster international undergraduate students' connections with conationals, host nationals, and fellow internationals should be included. As was mentioned above, it is common for international undergraduate students to rely heavily on conationals (students from their country of origin) for support early in their acculturation process. Therefore, activities that connect international undergraduate students with other students from their home country, as well as fellow international students, could help them establish a sense of security and solidarity. However, peer mentor programs should also encourage and help prepare mentees to interact with U.S. students, as such interactions are important for international undergraduate students' sense of belonging and sociocultural adjustment. To this end, a facilitated intercultural dialogue or university-wide group activities might provide mentees with scaffolded experiences. Lastly, advisers should be mindful that international undergraduate students from different home countries tend to have different levels of motivation to interact with peers from the host culture, and some of them are less concerned with having friends from the United States. Therefore, it is important to respect the students' acculturative preferences.

## PRACTICE SCENARIO

In the beginning of the semester, the program director reached out to the peer mentors to brainstorm ideas for programming. A few mentors indicated that many of their mentees seemed to struggle immensely around email communication. Dan, for example, shared that her mentees frequently forward emails from their professors or advisers and ask her to explain what was said in the email. Another mentor, Venessa, concurred that her mentees often expressed not knowing what to write in an email response.

### **What type of programming might this peer mentoring program offer?**

The program director decided to collaborate with the university writing center to offer a workshop on email writing. To avoid overlapping with the academic English course international mentees are often required to take, the workshop was designed to be highly practical by offering concrete examples of words, phrases, and expressions that are commonly used in communication in the U.S. academic settings. The workshop participants were then split into small groups to collectively draft an email to a professor regarding a few questions in the syllabus. Each small group was then invited to share their draft and receive feedback from their peers and the presenter. The participants expressed that the workshop was a valuable opportunity to learn not only writing skills, but also the culture embedded in email communication in the United States.

## Organizational Setup

Ideally, peer mentor programs should be sponsored by the international student office, or cosponsored by an allied student affairs office, such as the first-year student experience office or the multicultural student office. The international student office, compared to other administrative offices on campus, has the closest interaction with international undergraduate students and, therefore, is most informed about their needs. Involving another student affairs office brings additional advantages of increased funding, collaboration, and concerted advocacy efforts. The programs could either be coordinated by staff members or graduate assistants with staff supervision.

In terms of the mentor-mentee ratio, institutions have seen success with anywhere from 1 to 30 mentees per mentor. Although mentees in the one-on-one model are likely to get the most attention from their mentors, they often lack the opportunity to interact with other mentees in the program. Additionally, as was articulated before, it is unrealistic to recruit enough individual mentors to serve the growing population of international undergraduate students. On the other end, when mentors have too large a group of mentees, it is also unrealistic for them to develop effective mentoring relationships with each individual mentee. Another factor is that a fair percentage of international undergraduate students who sign up to be mentees in the beginning of the semester may decide to withdraw or drop out of the program for various reasons. Therefore, it is recommended that a peer mentor be assigned a moderately-sized group at the start, with approximately 10 to 15 mentees.

Lastly, it is strongly recommended that peer mentors be financially compensated by the program for several reasons. First, receiving financial compensation formalizes peer mentors' roles, responsibilities, and accountabilities. In addition to interacting with their assigned mentees periodically, peer mentors should be expected to attend various programmatic activities and organize additional group activities

for their mentees. Mentors should also be required to attend ongoing individual meetings with the program coordinator and group trainings. Having financial incentives is likely to motivate peer mentors to fulfill these responsibilities to a greater extent, thus providing higher-quality services to students. Second, being a peer mentor in this proposed framework can involve 8 to 10 hours of work per week throughout the academic year, which is a comparable workload to a typical work-study position. Therefore, it is reasonable that “peer mentor” is also considered a paid student employment position. Third, providing financial compensation is advantageous in recruiting the most qualified students to become peer mentors.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter discussed the use of peer mentoring programs in supporting first-year international undergraduate students in their transitions at U.S. universities. It is hoped that this chapter will provide a preliminary roadmap and starting point for readers to develop a variety of models to meet the growing needs of international undergraduate students. It is also hoped that more empirical studies will emerge to assess the efficacy of various peer mentoring models to further refine the current practices.

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## Chapter 9

# Challenges for International Undergraduates and How Professionals Can Help

By Cory Owen

The increase of international undergraduate students on college campuses has led to unique challenges for practitioners. According to the 2018 *Open Doors* report, released by IIE and the U.S. Department of State Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, the last 10 years has seen a 45.77 percent increase in international undergraduate students. In the last 25 years, there has been a 108.98 percent increase. While many undergraduates struggle with mental health, international students often encounter additional challenges that can make it even more difficult for them to maintain positive mental health, such as the culture shock of adjusting to U.S. campus life, Greek life, and logistical concerns, including housing and transportation. Though these challenges cannot be said to directly cause psychological disorders, such as depression, they may contribute to some of the factors discussed in [chapter 1](#), such as isolation. Therefore, empowering international students to navigate these common stressors of undergraduate life can be seen as a preventive measure before they compound into more critical situations. This chapter overviews the difficulties associated with undergraduate campus living, Greek life, and housing and transportation, and offers actionable tips to help international undergraduate students.

## ADJUSTING TO CAMPUS LIFE

Though advisers consistently talk about culture shock, students tend to not believe them during orientation. Culture shock cannot be underplayed when discussing mental health, and particularly not for international undergraduate students who may be living away from their home country for the first time and unfamiliar with on-campus lifestyles. Adjusting to campus life can be a big stressor for international undergraduate students. As discussed in [chapter 1](#), crash of expectations and other results of culture shock can be taxing on international students' mental health. While culture shock is normal, it is crucial to monitor a student's progress to ensure that signs of depression are not confused with typical responses to culture shock. Though each student makes his or her own adjustment to campus life, there are ways that international student advisers can help make the transition to college a little bit easier for international students.

## CHECKLIST FOR HELPING STUDENTS ADJUST TO CAMPUS LIFE

**Provide a comprehensive international student orientation.**

While most campuses have some type of international student orientation that overviews general culture shock (either stand-alone or integrated into the campuswide orientation program), practitioners should take into consideration what factors may be unique to their campuses and confusing for new students. For example, if a campus has a large Greek life presence, staff presenting at orientation should make sure to talk about it so that international students are not confused by all the boisterous events. If there is a large training corps (ROTC) presence on campus, explain its role so that new students are not confused by the uniforms and weapons training. If possible, bring



representatives from the counseling center to present on topics of adjustment for international students. If colleagues are unavailable, consider using other tools, such as videos like the “[Mental Health Awareness for International Students](#)” video created by International Student Insurance.

☑ **Create a cheat sheet with helpful vocabulary.**

Have current students help create a cheat sheet with useful vocabulary that might be confusing for non-native English speakers. This can range from technical terms in academics to common terms on campus, such as a nickname for the student union. If your campus has many traditions, make sure to include an explanation of those traditions on the cheat sheet.

☑ **Train campus partners.**

Identify which campus partners interact with your international students the most and determine what knowledge gaps exist. For example, work with orientation leaders and resident assistants (RAs) to ensure that they know what to expect as they welcome the incoming class of international undergraduates. It is particularly important for the RAs to understand how overseeing a floor with international students may lead to different types of roommate conflicts. Other partner offices on your campus may include academic affairs, athletics, Title IX, Greek life, and counseling services. These offices may want to have targeted information for international students.

☑ **Acquaint international undergraduates with Greek life.**

The fraternity and sorority system, also known as Greek life, is a prominent part of some U.S. campuses’ cultures and there are a lot of pros (e.g., social connections) and cons (e.g., time commitment) for international students joining Greek life. Providing a simple list of the pros and cons of participating in Greek life will help international students make decisions on whether or not they want to become involved. If possible, have an international student who is a member of a fraternity or sorority contribute to the list to ensure its authenticity. Such a list will be helpful in

## ORIENTATION TOPICS

- On-campus counseling services, location, hours, etc.
- Insurance coverage for counseling
- Topics related to culture shock such as:
  - Cultural adjustment issues
  - Academic difficulties
  - English language issues
  - Social adjustment
  - Depression
  - Anxiety or stress
  - Suicidal ideation

## SCHOOL-SPECIFIC VOCABULARY

Many schools, such as Rice University, have long-standing traditions, accompanied by their own set of vocabulary. At Rice, each of the residential colleges maintains its own orientation book, which includes a list of helpful lingo. Here’s an excerpt:

- Associate’s Night: A formal dinner held in your college’s commons once a semester to honor the Associates. Dress up and come eat good food with interesting people.
- Beer Bike: A very competitive, inter-college race/event held every spring, in which ten bikers and ten chuggers from each college compete in an epic struggle for personal college pride.

delineating some of the surprising aspects of Greek life that new students may not realize immediately, such as the cost (including recruitment fees, dues, house fees, social functions, and formal clothing), potential prevalence of alcohol (which may be an issue for students who come from cultures in which it is illegal to drink), and hazing (which can create confusion on the fine line between trying new things and prohibited behaviors). Offering resources that translate terms, such as “rush” and “legacy,” and connecting international undergraduates with a calendar of key events are two other ways to ease interested students’ transition into this potentially unfamiliar aspect of campus culture.

### PRACTICE SCENARIO

It is orientation time, and the Canadian students are zoned out and rolling their eyes as the presenters try to explain culture shock. The students clearly do not think that this information applies to them.

#### **What is the role of international student advisers in this situation?**

In this situation, advisers should:

- Plan a panel of current international students from around the world—including Canada—to have them talk about their own experiences with culture shock. Peer education is often the most effective tool to engage students.
- If the office does not have its own dedicated international student leaders, consider reaching out to other offices, such as student affairs or residence life, to see if they have current international students on their staff that could come speak at the next orientation or other events for international students.
- If there are no current international students in leadership roles, find domestic students who have studied or lived abroad.

## HOUSING AND TRANSPORTATION

Whether an international undergraduate lives on or off campus, there are many stressors to take into consideration. Often, college is the first time students live away from their families, and by moving to another country, cultural differences compound the difficulties of living in a new environment.

On most residential college campuses in the United States, first-year students are required to live on campus in a shared room. While some colleges have specific housing for international students, a majority of schools have integrated housing where international students are encouraged to make friends with domestic students and “branch out.” Evidence of intense adjustments to campus life can be seen in residence halls through increased numbers of roommate conflicts when one student is international and the other is not. In one survey, 10 percent of international students noted “roommate” as a concern to their mental well-being (Poyrazli 2015). Around one-third of undergraduate international students are Chinese (IIE 2018) and since most of these students are the only child of their family, they typically have not had to share a room before. Having two strangers live together is always complicated, but when cultural and communication style differences enter the equation, these intricate relationships

become even more complex. For example, students who come from high-context cultures may feel that they are communicating clearly (and politely) to their U.S. roommate about issues with overnight guests. However, the U.S. roommate may not understand this less direct form of communication and continue bringing overnight guests to the room. Friction can arise in situations like this, and both sides can feel misunderstood. Roommate struggles can lead to a lot of anxiety for students, especially if the conflict is severe.

For undergraduates who are attending a commuter campus, or living off campus as upperclassmen, isolation from the campus can play a role in deteriorating mental health. Beyond isolation, the sheer logistics of travel are added hurdles of off-campus living. These hurdles can be increasingly difficult depending on the location of the school.

Many institutions do offer affordable public transportation, though others necessitate having a car. Although some undergraduate students arrive in the United States with an international driving permit, many do not, and they must navigate the complicated system to obtain a state driver's license. This process comes with a slew of obstacles, such as studying for the exam, obtaining a car for the test, and traveling back and forth to the Department of Motor Vehicles (named differently from state to state). Furthermore, since the procedures for obtaining a driver's license vary state by state, it can be confusing for students to know what documents to take to prove their identity, the timeline for obtaining the license, or the duration that the license will be valid.

## CHECKLIST FOR DEMYSTIFYING HOUSING AND TRANSPORTATION

### **Understand the residential culture.**

On residential campuses, particularly those with mandatory live-on requirements, it is important for international student advisers to understand the residential culture and how it may intersect with aspects of international students' various cultures. Some campuses have international-only housing. Others have housing based on special interests, such as substance-free housing or quiet halls. Some residents halls are same-sex housing, co-ed, or gender-inclusive. Advisers should be aware of all these options and work with international undergraduates to connect them with the best fit and corresponding policies. International students will likely receive housing information from the residence life office; however, it can be helpful for the international advisers to remind the students of the housing lottery timeline, particularly if the campus closes the halls during the winter breaks. Include residence hall closure and lottery information with travel signature reminders to tie it all together.

### RESIDENCE LIFE BASICS

International advisers should have closer relationships with residence life in order to serve as a resource to the international undergraduates. A few things to ask about residential life are:

- Is there any themed housing?
- Is there housing over winter break for students who cannot go home?
- If the international student orientation is before regular move-in, when can international undergraduates move in?
- If international undergraduates have flights that arrive outside of normal business hours, how can they move in?
- Can international students ship certain items (e.g., bedding) ahead of time to be ready for move-in?

✓ **Partner with residence life.**

Understanding the housing options and how international undergraduates will be integrated into their buildings is vital to supporting them and to helping them find the appropriate resources. By keeping open communication with the residence life team members, they will have a point of contact should a problem arise with an international student. This can vary from consultations on cross-cultural misunderstandings to having early notification of an incident that may impact a student's ability

to remain in the United States. Provide training to the residence life staff (especially the RAs) to discuss common cultural miscommunications. Offer opportunities for previous RAs to share scenarios that they have experienced and discuss best practices. Bring these examples to your own international student orientation as well, so that the incoming students are aware of their resources and common pitfalls for roommate conflicts in terms of cultural differences.

✓ **Provide resources for off-campus living.**

Finding off-campus housing for international students can be a difficult task, particularly since they often do not have social security numbers yet. Having resources available for affordable housing options that are either near the school or easily commutable will help lessen the stress and anxiety that international students feel. For example, there may be options for an apartment complex near an institution to have an unofficial agreement to be flexible with international students who do not have credit histories as long as they present letters verifying that funding sources have been provided to the institution.

✓ **Compile information on public transportation options.**

If there is reliable and safe public transportation available, explaining the system, including sidewalk etiquette and subway safety, in the prearrival materials will help students travel to campus. Campuses may want to create a handout or web page with information about transportation as did [Carnegie Mellon University](#). If public transportation is not a good option for traveling to campus, compiling a list of nearby housing that is friendly to international students is helpful. Have current international students create a handout on transportation options that they often use, because administrators' perspectives may differ from what typical college students experience.

✓ **Offer tips on purchasing a vehicle.**

For students who want to acquire a personal vehicle, provide tip sheets on what to look for when buying a car and how to avoid being scammed. Since most international students have little to no credit, they often must buy used cars, so offer information on how to verify a car's value through the *Kelly Bluebook*. For students who choose to buy a car from an individual, discuss safety options and the need to meet in a central location, like a grocery store parking lot.

## RA'S AND INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Yewande Akintunji and Andrea Waughtel, resident assistants at Houston Baptist University, created a helpful tool on cultivating community for international students. Their [guide](#) focuses on reminding RAs that three areas best create stronger communities: communication, accommodation, and involvement.

## PRACTICE SCENARIO

Two students are living together—one from China and one from Texas. They are polite but not close. The student from Texas starts dating someone and asks his roommate if it is okay for his partner to sometimes stay the night. The Chinese student says yes, but as the semester progresses, he spends less and less time in his room. The international office receives a phone call from campus security saying that the Chinese student has brought pillows and a blanket to the library and seems to be living there.

### **What is the role of international student advisers in this situation?**

In this situation, advisers should:

- Meet with the residence life staff to have a mediation between the roommates and create a roommate contract with expectations that both roommates can agree upon. If they cannot agree on the ground rules for their room, see if there is an option to switch roommates.
- Train colleagues in other offices, such as residence life, counseling services, student affairs, and security, on cross-cultural communication.
- Educate international students on the culture in the residence halls and policies.
- Take a tour of the residence halls to learn the room layouts. Are they in a suite style, apartment style, mixed gender floors? Do they have private showers and other private amenities? These factors impact the living-learning environment. Understanding the living environment can inform how staff advise international students before they submit housing requests.

## PRACTICE SCENARIO

The office of residence life decides to change its policy and close down all buildings over winter break. Many international undergraduates often choose to stay on campus because it is too expensive to go home, and now they have nowhere to go.

### **What is the role of international student advisers in this situation?**

In this situation, advisers should:

- Provide a list of affordable temporary housing over the breaks.
- Facilitate a forum (through Facebook or a listserv) for current students (or possibly alumni) to have their peers house-sit over the break. This solution may provide a win-win scenario, particularly for students who are going away for the break, but have pets in need of care.
  - Whenever creating a tool such as this, confer with your legal counsel to ensure the language provided from the international office has been vetted.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter offers starting points for thinking about how on-campus processes that impact international undergraduates' mental health can be adjusted. Many of the topics can be addressed in prearrival materials or an online orientation to help prepare students. Collaboration between departments can also alleviate stress on your own office to ensure that there is a campuswide effort to welcome international undergraduates to college life. It is worth noting that many of the scenarios listed in this chapter can apply to international graduate students, faculty, and staff as well.

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## Chapter 10

# Intercultural Communication Challenges and How Professionals Can Help

By Justin A. Chen and Tat Shing Yeung

International students are a growing, diverse population faced with unique difficulties as they try to adapt to life in the United States. Addressing the stressors that exist in these students' daily lives can help them to better adjust and integrate into the campus community. This chapter discusses two common day-to-day challenges among international students—communication issues and lack of social support—and the impact of these challenges on the well-being of international students. It then provides practical advice to professionals regarding how to better address these problems. As explained in [chapter 1](#), communication barriers and isolation are two of the most common causes of poor mental health that international students report. Therefore, these topics should be priorities to professionals who work with international students.

## COMMUNICATION ISSUES

Most international students are required to submit English language proficiency test results before admission. If their results do not meet the institution's requirements, some schools allow international students to take and pass intensive English programs to gain admission. Nonetheless, language barriers remain a significant issue for many international students. Even though most students have received English language education in their home countries, many still struggle in academic settings with the four core language skills: reading, listening, writing, and speaking (Gebhard 2012). Common challenges include understanding a variety of accents, keeping up with the pace of speaking in class, being comfortable with their own accent, pronouncing words clearly, understanding language use in textbooks and readings, and writing in academic English, which can be considerably different from conversational English. These problems affect international students' academic performance and, as a result, may be significantly stressful for them.

In everyday life, international students' language and communication difficulties may be further compounded by a lack of cultural knowledge, which can hinder their understandings of slang, jokes, song lyrics, and U.S. political references, and therefore significantly affect their abilities to form relationships with students born in the United States (Kuo 2011). It is therefore common to see some international students only interacting with students from their own country, even on diverse campuses, because of difficulty bridging the cultural and language divide with their U.S.-born peers despite repeated efforts (Sümer, Poyrazli, and Grahame 2011). In our own work with international students, we have repeatedly heard that these more informal cross-cultural challenges are intimidating and may contribute to feelings of shame, embarrassment, and exclusion. Domestic students usually do not purposely exclude international students through the use of slang or inside references, but they are also unlikely to recognize the communication barrier that international students face or spontaneously modify their language to be more welcoming to others.

Language barriers not only create academic and social challenges but may also affect international students' aptitudes for self-care. When international students need to seek out clinical services such as counseling, they may become frustrated by an inability to effectively articulate their inner experiences and needs in English. Thoughts and feelings are difficult to express even in one's own native language, let alone a second language. International students may also possess verbal and nonverbal communication styles that differ from the mainstream U.S. culture, leading to the potential for misinterpretation by clinicians who are not culturally aware (Sue and Sue 2016). Such misunderstandings can be detrimental to developing rapport and lead to early termination of therapy (Pedersen 1991; Geva and Wiener 2015) or even decreased willingness to seek help in the first place.

## CHECKLIST FOR BREAKING DOWN COMMUNICATION BARRIERS

### **Facilitate nonverbal connections.**

Spoken language is just one means of communication; consider strengthening outreach to international students via programs that may be more nonverbal in nature, including those related to music (e.g., performing arts, concerts), physical activity (e.g., hiking, sports), or artistic expression (e.g., henna painting, sculpting, calligraphy). Students from different backgrounds who interact and engage with each other in these contexts are well positioned to help overcome cultural or language barriers in pursuit of a common goal.

With the intense political climate, I believe it is important, now more than ever, to be competent in cultural diversity. It is essential to be sensitive and understanding of the cultural differences we all exhibit that would enable us to thrive towards a more compassionate community, on-campus and elsewhere. As an international student studying at Binghamton University, I've noticed that more programs have been geared towards this goal, offering various training sessions about the importance of cross-cultural communication, in addition to resources and offices that are equipped to provide students with the necessary guidance and support, particularly as it pertains to maintaining overall health and well-being. —Lubna Abdul-Hadi, a PhD student from Jordan

### **Increase cultural competency and humility among providers.**

Although most mental health training programs include at least some discussion of multicultural issues, cultural competency and humility training should receive particular emphasis in counseling and applied psychology programs and college and university counseling settings. Colleges and universities can start with a needs analysis of their counseling services according to their settings, student population, clinicians' current cultural competency, and past mental health concerns from students seeking counseling. Based on the results of the needs analysis, they can design training programs for clinicians to address these needs. Useful topics to consider may include cultural differences in verbal and nonverbal communication, cross-culturally acceptable concepts and terminology to use when discussing mental health, acculturation assessment, and cultural adaptations of evidence-based treatments.

Favorable outcomes in psychotherapy importantly depend upon the quality of the relationship between counselor and client, but one size does not fit all. The factors that make for a positive working alliance vary from person to person and may



be significantly influenced by cultural differences and expectations. For example, counselors who adopt the nonjudgmental, active listening stance welcomed by many U.S. students may be experienced as passive, disinterested, or frustratingly nondirective and unhelpful by some international students whose cultural expectations are for practical advice and problem-solving strategies.<sup>1</sup> —Richard J. Eichler, PhD, executive director of counseling and psychological services, Columbia University

☑ **Provide additional English language courses and tutoring services.**

Early on, identify students whose language skills may impede their ability to progress well in the program and offer them additional tutoring and support. These services can come in the form of structured, credit-bearing courses or one-on-one instruction in the university writing center, depending on the proficiency and goals of the student.

## SOCIAL SUPPORT

As a result of moving to the United States, international students leave behind their social support systems and often struggle to develop new support networks. Research has found that international students prefer to seek help for mental health issues from more informal sources, such as friends and peers, rather than from medical or mental health professionals. Poor social support has been found to be associated with greater feelings of hopelessness and depressive symptoms among international students. Conversely, more social support is correlated with stronger English language ability and longer duration of stay in the United States (Sümer, Poyrazli, and Grahame 2011). These findings highlight the importance of reducing barriers to social engagement in order to promote effective social interactions and networks, which can protect against depression and other mental health issues.

## CHECKLIST FOR FOSTERING SOCIAL SUPPORT

☑ **Get started early during orientation.**

Schools play an important role in creating opportunities for international students to connect with each other and with U.S. students in a relaxed, comfortable setting that facilitates connection. Orientation can be a starting point for building social networks in the United States, as well as for encouraging U.S. students to expand their own social and cultural horizons by making friends with international students. In addition to presenting essential school information, schools can incorporate icebreakers and social activities during orientation presentations to encourage students to get to know each other. Small-group activities facilitated by senior international student mentors provide spaces in which personal experiences can be shared and new students feel comfortable to ask questions more easily.

☑ **Travel off campus.**

Some universities organize school trips to cities and nearby attractions for international students to enrich their cultural experience while making friends, as international students are often interested in exploring and learning more about the United States. Consider organizing activities that cover a range of interests (e.g., sports, cultural practices, food, the arts, etc.) to appeal to different students. On these trips, commonly led by student leaders, international students often pair up or travel in groups during free time. Students who are shyer can also be given the option to travel with student

leaders so that they will at least have opportunities to interact with those individuals, who may be more skilled at engaging others. Exploring a new location with peers can be a wonderful way to promote bonding and socialization.

✓ **Consider creative ways to integrate international and domestic students.**

For example, Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina hosts a “Football 101” program for international students, which not only includes a tour of the athletic facilities and explains the importance of the game to campus culture, but also invites international and U.S. students to suit up themselves and play a pick-up game of touch football. This sort of activity promotes inclusion, lived experience, and understanding of a common U.S. interest. As an added bonus, it may help international students to join conversations on this common small talk topic with other students in the future.

We organize monthly cultural activities of different countries. These activities are run by students and/or faculty native to a country and open to all students and faculty. Participants have a global discussion on life and culture beyond our campus while enjoying food from another country. We believe such events promote mutual understanding and engagement. —Assistant director of a university international student center

✓ **Encourage students to participate in campus organizations and activities.**

International students may be unfamiliar with the importance of engaging in extracurricular student organizations in the United States. Some, in fact, prefer to avoid them in favor of single-mindedly focusing on academics, which they view as their primary reason for coming to the United States in the first place. International students therefore may need to be specifically encouraged to find organizations or clubs with others who share the same interests, hobbies, or causes. During orientation, international student offices can invite senior international students to share the benefits of and their positive experiences with campus organizations and activities. A calendar or card listing upcoming campus activities or club fairs can be distributed to students for easy reference.

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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCE

Center for Global Education: "[Innovative International Student Support Programming](#)"

1 For more on this topic, see Eichler and Schwartz (2010).

## Conclusion

This volume has explored the mental health challenges affecting international students and what advisers and others in the ISSS office can do to help, both before and after problems arise. Professionals in a variety of fields related to international education and health have approached these issues from unique perspectives, offering practical advice and actionable suggestions. To synthesize the best practices and lessons learned, this final section compiles these tips, key takeaways, and supplemental materials, summarizing them for quick reference.

### Chapter 1: Common Factors of Mental Health Challenges Among International Students

#### *Common Factors that Contribute to Mental Health Challenges*

- Second language anxiety
- Isolation
- Crash of expectations/identity crises
- Family relationships
- Financial insecurity

### Chapter 2: Common Factors of Challenges for East Asian International Students and How Professionals Can Help

#### *Checklist for Navigating Family Expectations*

- Help students understand and manage self- and family expectations.
- Consider improving orientation materials for families back home.
- Encourage students to talk to their families about both the good and the bad.
- Provide training and education to staff and faculty to help bridge cultural divides.

#### *Checklist for Shifting Illness Beliefs and Cultural Stigma*

- Utilize culturally acceptable terminology that takes into account the stigma of psychiatric issues.
- Educate international students on mental health issues.
- Explain the health care system to international students.

### Chapter 3: Connecting International Students to Counseling

#### *Checklist for Connecting International Students to Counseling*

- Notice and address concerns directly.
- Address myths.
- Start the process together.
- Follow up.

## Chapter 4: The Role of Insurance When Dealing with Mental Health Issues Affecting International Students

### *Questions International Student Advisers Should Be Able to Answer About the Role of Insurance*

- Does the counseling center or student health center charge for counseling or other services? If there is a fee, will the insurance cover the costs?
- Where can students go off campus? How will the insurance plan work if students go in-network or out-of-network?
- Will the counseling center or medical professional accept direct payment from the insurance company?
- What are the counseling center's hours, where is it located, and how can an appointment be made?
- What should students expect when they arrive at the counseling center and when they are being seen?
- What do students need to know about the confidentiality of medical information?

### *Questions to Ask When Evaluating an Insurance Plan*

- Does the plan cover both inpatient and outpatient mental health treatment? If so, to what extent?
- Will this plan cover prescription medication related to mental health treatment?
- Does this plan cover drug and alcohol abuse treatment?
- Are there any major exclusions (e.g., suicide or self-inflicted injuries)?

### *Considerations When Advising Students on Returning to Home Country for Treatment*

- What happens if students have to take a leave of absence and their immigration status changes?
- What if students maintain their immigration status but are no longer enrolled in a full-time course load?
- If students are not enrolled in coursework, can they keep their insurance plans?

## Chapter 5: Sexual (Mis)conduct and How Professionals Can Help International Students

### *Checklist for Helping Students Adjust to Dating in the United States*

- Work with current students to facilitate a candid conversation on the topic.
- Create joint programming.
- Stress the importance of consent.
- Discuss LGBTQ+ culture in the United States.

### *Checklist for Working with the Title IX Office*

- Prepare students beforehand.
- Provide demographic information.
- Consider tailored trainings on Title IX and bystander intervention.
- Train office staff.

### *Checklist for Discussing Reporting Requirements with International Students*

- Clarify terms and resources.
- Empower the survivor.
- Know the amnesty policy.

## **Chapter 6: When a Mental Health Crisis Hits**

### *Checklist for Helping During Mental Health Crises*

- Gain a larger picture of the situation.
- Locate and contact student.
- Arrange for 24/7 support, if necessary.

### *Checklist for Helping in the Event of Hospitalization*

- Help students with HIPAA.
- Report incidents.
- Request support of local faith or campus groups with which the student is affiliated.

## **Chapter 7: Suicide: When an International Student Loses Hope**

### *Checklist of Questions to Ask a Student Who May Be Suicidal*

- “Are you thinking about killing or hurting yourself? Tell me about it.”
- “How will you do it? Do you have a plan?”
- “How often do you have these thoughts of dying? How long do these suicidal thoughts stay with you?”
- “Do you know anyone who committed or tried to commit suicide? Tell me about it.”
- “Have you ever felt this way or attempted suicide before? [If yes] What happened then?”
- “Is there anything or anyone to stop you from hurting yourself?”
- “What keeps you from hurting yourself so far?”
- “What is in the future for you?”
- “Have you taken any medication, drug, or alcohol within the last 24 hours?”
- “Have you talked about this with anyone else?”

## **Chapter 8: Undergraduate Peer Mentoring Programs for Improved Social Support and Mental Health**

### *Major Benefits of Peer Mentoring (Nora and Crisp 2007; Crisp and Cruz, 2009)*

- Psychological and emotional support: listening, forging mentor-mentee alliances, identifying problems, and providing encouragement

- ☑ Goal-setting and career paths: assessment of strengths, weaknesses, and abilities, as well as assistance with career goals
- ☑ Academic subject knowledge support: supporting mentee’s academic success inside and outside the classroom
- ☑ Role-modeling: sharing life experiences, achievements, and failures to enrich the mentoring relationship and facilitate mentee growth

TRAINING SESSIONS		
Training	Topic	Guest Speaker
Initial Training (6 hours)	Overview of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ the peer mentoring program</li> <li>■ student employee responsibilities and expectations</li> <li>■ nature of peer mentoring</li> <li>■ foundational helping skills</li> <li>■ campus resources</li> </ul>	
Group Training 1	Case seminar on common mentee concerns	
Group Training 2	Strategies for international students to succeed in a U.S. classroom	Academic support office staff
Group Training 3	Helping mentees feel connected in the residence space	Residence office staff
Group Training 4	Case seminar on common mentee concerns	
Group Training 5	Providing emotional support for mentees and self-care	Counseling center staff
Group Training 6	Culturally responsive mentoring	Multicultural affairs staff
Group Training 7	Reflection, feedback, and brainstorm for next semester	

## Chapter 9: Challenges for International Undergraduates and How Professionals Can Help

### *Checklist for Helping Students Adjust to Campus Life*

- ☑ Provide a comprehensive international student orientation.
- ☑ Create a cheat sheet with helpful vocabulary.
- ☑ Train campus partners.
- ☑ Acquaint international undergraduates with Greek life.

### *Checklist for Demystifying Housing and Transportation*

- ☑ Understand the residential culture.
- ☑ Provide resources for off-campus living.
- ☑ Compile information on public transportation options.
- ☑ Offer tips on purchasing a vehicle.

## Chapter 10: Intercultural Communication Challenges and How Professionals Can Help

### *Checklist for Breaking Down Communication Barriers*

- ☑ Facilitate nonverbal connections.
- ☑ Increase cultural competency and humility among providers.
- ☑ Provide additional English language courses and tutoring services.

### *Checklist for Fostering Social Support*

- ☑ Get started early during orientation.
- ☑ Travel off campus.
- ☑ Consider creative ways to integrate international and domestic students.
- ☑ Encourage students to participate in campus organizations and activities.

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Videos by International Student Insurance cover topics including [mental health awareness for international students](#) and [culture shock and stress](#). International students may also benefit from International Student Insurance’s [emotional and mental health training program](#).

The Massachusetts General Hospital Cross-Cultural Student Emotional Wellness (MGH CCSEW) [Consortium](#) “offers an avenue for schools to engage on an ongoing basis with [MGH CCSEW] clinicians, who include the nation’s leading experts on cross-cultural student mental health. Furthermore, it offers the unique opportunity to join a community of like-minded peers who are dedicated to advancing campus mental health and inclusive education.”

The [Tufts University Counseling and Mental Health Service](#) website offers information for international students about counseling. It may serve as a model for introducing counseling to international students or a helpful example for refining other institutions’ websites that are geared toward international students.

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## About the Contributors

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**Justin A. Chen, MD, MPH**, is executive director and cofounder of the MGH Center for Cross-Cultural Student Emotional Wellness. He delivers talks and trainings for families, clinicians, and educators throughout the United States on promoting the emotional health and psychological resilience of diverse student populations. As a practicing clinical psychiatrist, Chen specializes in the treatment of mood and anxiety disorders in young adults. He also serves as medical director of ambulatory psychiatry and codirector of primary care psychiatry at Massachusetts General Hospital. Chen serves as associate director of medical student education in psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, a training mentor and codirector of the longitudinal sociocultural psychiatry curriculum for MGH/McLean psychiatry residents, and an assistant professor at Harvard Medical School.

**Jennifer D. Frankel, MIB**, is the international director at International Student Insurance (ISI). She has worked with ISI since 2009 and has developed key informational resources on international education to help explore the emotional and mental health of international students. Frankel has presented at NAFSA conferences throughout the United States and has worked with international students, faculty, and staff on college campuses to raise awareness of mental health. Active in international education, Frankel has served in leadership positions for both the Florida Association of International Educators and NAFSA Region II.

**Peter Maramaldi, PhD, MPH, LCSW**, is a professor at the Simmons School of Social Work; an adjunct professor at the Harvard University T. H. Chan School of Public Health; and an instructor at the Harvard School of Dental Medicine. Maramaldi has more than 30 years of practical experience, including 16 years in the International House at Columbia University, where he developed and delivered comprehensive cross-cultural mental health services for a community residence with over 700 graduate students and trainees representing more than 100 countries each academic year. Maramaldi has served on national boards, committees, and special work groups. He has received awards for mentoring and promoting the careers of new faculty.

**Cory Owen, PhD**, is the assistant dean of international advisement and diversity initiatives at the Juilliard School. In this role, she oversees visa compliance for the international community, while supporting the campus through diversity and inclusion work. Owen also serves as a deputy Title IX coordinator for the school. Beyond her work at Juilliard, she has served NAFSA in numerous capacities on both the regional and national levels. Owen has received Fulbright International Educator Administrators grants to Germany in 2012 and to Korea in 2017. Her dissertation focused on how the "model minority myth" impacts anxiety and stress levels for Asian and Asian American students.

**Xuhua Qin, PhD** is a licensed psychologist and multicultural specialist working for Tufts University Counseling and Mental Health Services. She has worked for several university counseling centers across the United States and specializes in mental health treatment and prevention for international students. Her work includes

psychotherapy; consultations with faculty, staff, administrators, and parents; and development of outreach programs. Qin was awarded the Thomas M. Magoon Excellence in Counseling Award in 2011 by the Commission for Counseling and Psychological Services and the Diversity Leadership Mentoring Award in 2013 by the Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors.

**Tat Shing Yeung** is the director of programming and content of the MGH Center for Cross-Cultural Student Emotional Wellness, leading a team of mental health professionals and students to create psychoeducational materials for students and parents from diverse populations. Yeung's personal experiences as an international student and educator of minority students, including first- and second-generation immigrants in Hong Kong, formed his research and clinical interests in minority populations. His current projects include working with Asian American and international students on mental health and cross-cultural studies in behavioral assessment. Through his training as a PhD student in school psychology, Yeung conducts bilingual evaluations and provides school-based mental health services in Cantonese and Mandarin. He received the Cal Catterall Award 2018 from the International School Psychology Association.

**Peitao Zhu** is currently a doctoral student in counseling and counselor education at Syracuse University. An international student from Shanghai, Zhu came to the United States in 2014 and obtained his MA in mental health counseling and behavioral medicine at Boston University School of Medicine in 2016. Zhu is currently a graduate assistant at the Slutzker Center for International Services at Syracuse University and coordinates the Connections Peer Mentoring Program for up to 300 first-year international undergraduate students each year. In addition, Zhu is a mental health counselor in New York state.

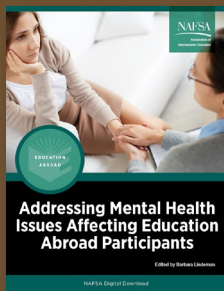
# About the Editor

**Patricia A. Burak** is an assistant professor in the College of Arts and Sciences and the Honors Program at Syracuse University. She also served as the director of the Slutzker Center for International Services for 32 years and as a board member of InterFaith Works of Central New York and the International Center of Syracuse. Burak has held national and regional leadership positions within NAFSA: Association of International Educators and coedited the NAFSA book *Crisis Management in a Cross-Cultural Setting* (2001).

## RELATED RESOURCES

### ADDRESSING MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES AFFECTING EDUCATION ABROAD PARTICIPANTS

EDITED BY BARBARA LINDEMAN



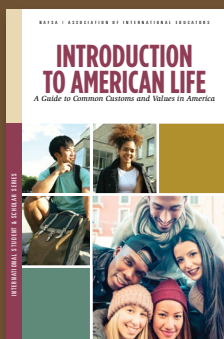
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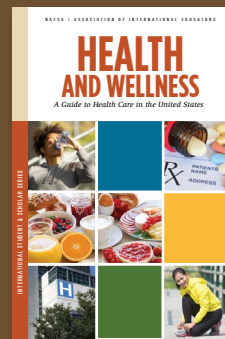
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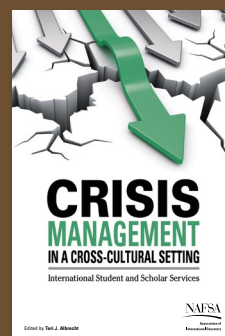
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