

Counseling: Forging a Cultural Bridge

THE TRANSITION TO COLLEGE CAN BE DIFFICULT FOR STUDENTS AS THEY LEAVE home to start life on their own as adults. For international students, the transition can be even more challenging—they must also navigate their way through new cultural layers in the U.S. college environment. Due to the unique circumstances that international students encounter when they set foot on a U.S. campus, advisers can benefit from having some knowledge of how the counseling field can assist them to better understand their students' cultural adjustment process in the United States.

Practical Approaches to Reaching International Students

Reaching international students, practically and programmatically, requires a multi-level perspective. From a psychological vantage point, several principles can be helpful when designing programs for international students: *skills training*, *acculturation* and *cultural switching concepts*, and *cultural narratives*.

SKILLS TRAINING. A central principle in cognitive behavioral therapy is that in each student's developmental identity arc, it is important to foster a mindset of developing one's skill-ability, a term that was coined by Marsha M. Linehan in 1993. This is an important concept for international students, as the daily demands of academic life require numerous skills for success: interpersonal skills, communication skills, self-management skills, and study skills, to name a few. Framing cultural change in terms of expanding one's skill-ability can free up anxiety that students may feel and help students think of their growth as an opportunity to add new cultural skills to the skills they have already mastered in their home environment.

For example, a common teaching point I emphasize in cultural workshops for international students is to first ask "What is the skill that is missing in this situation that can help me?" before putting unrealistic pressure on themselves to be "more American." I add that each student comes to the United States with culturally sanctioned modes of behavior, so the goal is

not only for students to learn more about U.S. cultural norms, but also to equip them with skills that help them function in the new cultural environment in a manner that is also consistent with their own values.

ACCULTURATION. Fostering an international student's skill-ability is very much linked to acculturation. Original cultural models of acculturation viewed it as a one-dimensional process, moving from an un-aculturated state to assimilation in the new environment. Updated views suggest a multidimensional approach, with change taking place within three distinct domains: behavior, language, and identity.

For example, most students acculturate behaviorally. Students may easily figure out their academic routines—going to classes and completing assignments. But this behavior does not correlate with their language competence or identity, which are more complex. For many international students, there is a tension between how they identify and how they are perceived. The goal is not to abandon everything that was familiar to them, but to integrate or add new sensibilities into the ways that they already know themselves. A Turkish student who was known as a jokester back home shared his challenge of translating his sense of humor to his U.S. campus experience:

Back home, I enjoy making people laugh. I am the funny person. I want people to know me in the same way here. But, what is funny back home in Turkey is not the same as what is funny here.

EDITOR'S NOTE:

This article is based on one mental health clinician's work with international students over the past 10 years. This counselor's guiding principles of cross-cultural counseling, reviewing collaborative program efforts, and sharing resources for advisers are outlined.

Cultural Skills Worksheet for International Students

CULTURAL SWITCHING CONCEPTS.

Another helpful psychological construct that can be pivotal in understanding the international student's emotional experience is the concept of *cultural frame switching* (this term was coined by researchers Hong, Morris, Chiu, and Benet-Martinez in 2000). The construct of cultural frame switching looks at the ability of bicultural individuals to switch between internalized cultural meaning systems in response to environmental and social cues. This is an important idea, because it is crucial to be mindful not only of how international students establish identity, but also of the ability to adapt throughout the course of the day between different relational styles. Being multicultural requires the ability to access different skills (switch cultural frames) in competing cultural environments. Using this concept, I ask the following questions in workshops: What is the cultural style of the student? Within their cultural style, what feels natural, what are the points of conflict? Is the original cultural style compatible with the host culture? One student from Thailand exemplified this example nicely: her style was more observant and experiential—she had to learn to be more expressive. After learning this concept, she learned how to switch between U.S. and Asian styles and learned when to take a break:

I learned to talk more and be assertive in class...and with American students. I know my grades depend on participation. I have made two friends by being assertive... but, by the end of the week, I feel tired. I am glad to be with my own friends where we could be together and not talk so much.

CULTURAL NARRATIVES. Finally, a narrative perspective is very informative in understanding international students. When working with students, it is important to listen for the multiple influences, or story lines, that shape people. For international students, identity is often rooted in a myriad of sources, some of which may be unfamiliar to us. Once such example comes from a counseling session with a Mexican student from an impoverished background, who was about to complete her Ph.D.

COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Communication is the most challenging skill for international students to master. Here are a few tips to keep in mind as you negotiate the process of learning to communicate in the United States.

Remember that communication is a process. Even among individuals who speak the same language, communication is an effort.

When communication situations go wrong, debrief. Build on mistakes and disappointments instead of being overly self-critical.

When communication situations are tough, ask yourself, Is this a difficult situation or difficult person? The key is to remember to problem solve when communication problems develop.

English proficiency is a common concern for most students. It can be helpful to do an honest check-in to determine where you need help.

Do you think you are struggling with a language problem (finding the words) or a feelings problem (anxiety)?

COPING SKILLS

The next time you have a problem try the skill of *analyze before you personalize*. Most problems are not black or white. There are many parts to a problem. Take a moment, talk it out, and decide what steps to take.

Practice self-help. The United States has a culture that values self-help. This means that you can identify a need, for example time management, how to flirt, or how to communicate, and seek out the self-help through an expert or workshop.

It can be hard to adjust to a new cultural environment when you have mixed feelings. When you think you are having difficulties with this, it can be helpful to evaluate your feelings. Do a values check-in on yourself. Are you struggling with value confusion—You do not understand the norms around you—or value conflict—You do understand the norms, but they are not compatible with your own values.

Adjusting to a new country is challenging even under the best of circumstances. On what levels do you feel you have made the transition? Where do you need the help?

Language, Behavior, Identity?

PEOPLE SKILLS

People skills take time. The most important goal should be to grow into a people-style that fits with your cultural values and views of yourself.

Look for creative ways to translate your home identity to your new cultural environment. If you are a dancer at home, would you consider joining a dancing class or club? Many activities are cross-cultural, and people from various backgrounds can come together for a mutual goal.

Plan for daily opportunities for emotional refueling. For example, if you have to be more expressive than you normally are in your cultural background, find outlets for more familiar ways of relating.

Cultural change can feel like both a loss and an opportunity. Cultural switching concepts can be helpful to ease your transition: Can you adapt to different behaviors in different contexts while preserving a core identity? If so, what are these core qualities you would like to preserve? What skills/qualities would you like to grow into?

Improve your communication skills. We are always negotiating the ways people view us. Good communication can help build connections.

Glossary

I cannot describe to you where my family comes from. No one in my family has ...education. It is more than feeling different from them. I am not the same anymore. I am going to have a different life. I don't know how to handle this.

Attachments run deep, not only to family members, but also to cultural symbols such as religion. In many parts of the world, these additional domains hold equal weight to family of origin. Providing room for dialogue about alternate story lines that help or hinder student's development is critical.

Reaching International Students Programmatically

At New York University, I have had the unique opportunity to establish a collaborative alliance with the Office of International Students and Scholars. We have established a collaborative outreach on several levels. First, I have been available as a direct counseling resource to the office. Second, we co-authored a psycho-educational brochure informing international students of the ways that counseling is used in the United States: *The Role of Counseling in the United States*. Third, we have co-led a successful cultural skills training course, "American Ways." The course is a socialization

Acculturation: A process of learning and adapting to the norms, behaviors, and values of a new cultural environment.

Cultural narrative: This refers to the angle or perspective from which we listen to an individual's story. Cultural narratives can have their roots in ethnicity, class, race, or gender.

Cultural frame switching: The capacity of an individual to alternate between different styles of relating. For example: Western style—expressive vs. Eastern style—observing.

Options shock: Similar to culture shock, where an individual has a difficult time absorbing difference, this term refers to situations where an individual has a difficult time understanding how to utilize resources that are different from those in their own cultural environment.

workshop series set in the U.S. cultural perspective, which assists students with the skills required to negotiate acculturation challenges over four major areas: understanding cultural norms, communication skills, negotiation skills, and academic skills.

To further illustrate the application of the psychological principles noted earlier, I will explain a few ideas from the counseling side of this collaboration. To begin, when I am working on cultural programming of any kind, I have always found the challenge is not only to explain cultural differences, but on a deeper level, to find a way to bridge conceptual gaps. Based on my cultural research, I promote the idea of *concept education*. This has been a helpful intervention, formulated from my clinical work, to navigate cultural impasses. For example, in the workshops we teach at NYU/OISS, before we introduce the services available to students on campus, we first introduce students to the concept of self-help. I explain that in U.S. culture, there are self-help books and workshops on topics ranging from balancing your budget to flirting, and it is culturally acceptable to identify a need and seek out help for it in a public forum. What I have discovered is that often students are not only experiencing culture shock when adjusting to the United States, but also *options shock*. So before students can make use of all the services on campus, I introduce a cultural concept such as self-help to ease transition into this new mode of behavior.

Another teaching point of the workshop series is encouraging students to commit to evaluating their feelings about all the cultural changes that may be expected of them. What this means is that the educators can dialogue with students about the opposing forces in their lives. Cultural modes of behavior are reinforced in each society by shared values. This is where it can be helpful to encourage students to tease out *value confusion versus value conflicts*. For example, some cultures value observing and listening, while other cultures value direct expression. It can be very helpful to tease out the cultural challenges that students will have to face and encourage them to evaluate their feelings and anxieties about new modes of behavior.

Returning to the concept of cultural switching, it can also be helpful to use this as a tool in cultural programming. It is common for international students, overly eager to adapt to U.S. ways, to superficially impose

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Introduction to American Life

This publication is part of NAFSA's very popular U.S. Culture Series. This booklet is designed to be used in preparing international students for successful cultural adjustment. Writers Lanie Denslow, Mary Tinkham, and Patricia Willer address the American concepts of time, communication, status and hierarchy, protections and restrictions in rule of law, regional differences across the United States, and building connections with family and friends. This publication can be reviewed on line at the NAFSA Web site and purchased by calling 1.866.538.1927 (toll free) or 240.646.7036



international students do experience racism, marginalization, and cultural stereotyping. Any student who is different from the majority culture, due to ethnicity, race, class, or nationality, is constantly dealing with the way the world may react to them. Keeping an eye out for such challenges in your student communities is critical. A referral for counseling or a support group can be helpful at this juncture.

Our work with international students is vital. One human connection at a time, we clarify stereotypes, challenge cultural assumptions, and create opportunities for new relational experiences. Each cultural bridge we establish, student by student, is a contribution to promoting peace, tolerance,

and renewed cultural bonds for our emerging global society. **IE**

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The collaborative alliance between New York University's counseling office and the Office of International Students and Scholars described in this article was launched with the assistance of Nancy E. Young, associate director of the Office of International Students and Scholars.

U.S. standards on their personal growth. This ultimately limits them from finding creative ways to work through their concerns. It is very important to emphasize to students that every cultural style has its strengths as well as its limitations. Programs that help students to problem solve on the details of cultural switching challenges can be very helpful. Cultural switching involves not only adjusting to different realities, but also learning what skills and sensibilities are appropriate to different interpersonal situations. Students are acculturating on multiple socialization levels, not only in family of origin roles, but also in academic and professional roles for which they may have no frame of reference.

A great question that explores this dynamic is, "What kind of specific challenges do you face as you switch from the classroom, to a social situation, to a professional situation, and then to the personal realm?"

Additional questions can include the following:

- What cultural skills does the student bring from the original environment: expertise, sensibilities, and skills?
- Where are the sources of anxiety, in what kind of people situations?

These kinds of culturally attuned questions can help students identify their points of struggle and find constructive solutions.

Lastly, an often neglected area of programming and campus support is the issue of racism or cultural acceptance. Unfortunately,

The Role of Counseling in the United States, a brochure for international students to help them better understand how to obtain mental health counseling on their college campus is available online at: <http://www.nyu.edu/oiss/beyond/health/index.html>. Requests to reprint it with permission should be addressed to the author of this article via e-mail to rqm3463@nyu.edu.

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