

Chapter 59

Help Seeking Behaviors of International Students: Stigma, Acculturation, and Attitudes towards Counseling

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ABSTRACT

International students' pursuit of education in the United States (US) is mutually beneficial to both international students and the economy of the United States. Students often experience culture shock or transitional stress upon arrival. Despite these challenges, research indicates that international students are not likely to seek professional counseling to manage or resolve their issues. In the event that they seek help they are known to prefer medical instead of psychological help. Authors in this chapter review the influence of stigma and acculturational variables on help seeking behaviors of international students. The authors also discuss implications for international students and institutions of higher education, and conclude with recommendations that may be beneficial to international students, student counseling services, and institutions of higher education in the United States.

INTRODUCTION

The field of mental health has developed various ways through which they have come to understand the symptoms and progression of mental illness and how it interacts with personal well-being (Corrigan, 2004). Corrigan (2004) states that individuals with mental illness are often discriminated against by the general public and also by mental health providers who have a poor understanding of stigma and how it affects the lives of individuals struggling with mental illness or mental health issues. Literature indicates that stigma towards mental health issues is associated with discrimination and fewer visits to the doctors

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and psychology clinics (Corrigan, Markowitz, & Watson, 2004; Henderson, Evans-Lacko, & Thornicroft, 2013), and often leads to a slew of negative stereotypes towards individuals with mental health problems such as a fear that they are dangerous, unpredictable, and incapable (Quinn & Knifton, 2014; Scrambler, 2009). In addition, stigmatizing beliefs which consequently lead to discriminatory behaviors towards individuals with mental health concerns are said to have similar patterns across cultures (Van Brakel, 2006) implying a global negative perception towards mental health issues. Given the societal connotations and implications ascribed to mental illness and mental health services, it seems reasonable that some students may exhibit some reticence when considering the need to pursue mental health services.

This chapter attempts to establish a general understanding of the help seeking behaviors of international students from the context of mental health stigma and the attitudes of international students towards counseling. In addition, it attempts to understand the role of gender, and international student's length of stay in influencing their attitudes towards counseling. Understanding the relationship between the aforementioned variables and help-seeking behavior is important because it reflects the cognitions that prevent individuals who might need help from seeking help. Furthermore, understanding this relationship helps in determining how likely international students are to initiate or complete therapy. The practical significance portion of this chapter discusses several issues that are pertinent to international students. The resolutions presented in that portion are introduced as a tool that could be used by professionals, educators, and other individuals who work with international students in higher education to either understand the international student experience, or to help international students to understand their own experiences.

BACKGROUND

Apart from contributing immense amounts of revenue to institutions of higher education, international students are a wealth of multicultural information regarding their particular cultures and beliefs at their various institutions (Arthur, 2004). International students are however individuals whose lives, belief, lifestyle, and communication styles may be different from students at their host institution. Many international students go through various adjustment experiences that might prove problematic to them upon arrival in the United States (US). Transitioning to life on a university campus may be challenging for some and there is well-documented evidence (Constantine, Anderson, Berkel, Caldwell, & Utsey, 2005; Hays & Lin, 1994; Hyun, Quinn, Madon, & Lustig, 2007; Mori, 2000; Wilton & Constantine, 2003) that cultural differences make it more difficult for international students to adjust as compared to domestic students. There is also the likelihood that international students may not initiate, or persist in help-seeking efforts if counselors are not equipped to deal with the myriad of issues that international students present (Pedersen, 1997).

With prevalence of mental health disorders in student populations having increased by more than 60% over the past 13 years (Benton, Robertson, Tseng, Newton, & Benton, 2003), there is the expectation that more students, including international students, will utilize mental health services. On the contrary, Hyun et al. (2007) found in their study that more than 50% of the students (both international and domestic) knew about counseling services, and close to 50% indicated a need to utilize these services; addition-

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