



*A Center Brief\**

## **International Students: Addressing Barriers to Successful Transition\***

(July, 2013)

### **Abstract**

As an increasing number of international students are coming to the U.S., greater attention is needed to addressing barriers to successful transitions. While many of these students are able to capitalize on available transition programs and on their personal coping abilities, too many experience predictable and preventable problems. This report highlights international student trends, common transition problems, and the nature and scope of transition supports that policy makers need to ensure are in place for all who come to the U.S. in pursuit of an education.

\*Joyce Cheng worked on this resource as part of her work with the national Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA. The Center co-directors are Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor; it operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project, Dept. of Psychology, UCLA,

Write: Center for Mental Health in Schools, Box 951563, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1563  
Phone: (310) 825-3634 email: [smhp@ucla.edu](mailto:smhp@ucla.edu) website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>

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## **International Students: Addressing Barriers to Successful Transition<sup>1</sup>**

**R**ecent data indicate that the U.S.A. is among the most popular destinations for international students, attracting 17% of all foreign students worldwide.<sup>2</sup> High interest on the part of students and their recruiters yields increasing numbers.

International students come with the expectation of achieving a good education, and some hope to stay on after graduation. Active recruitment is done by schools (e.g., to counter shrinking revenues and declining enrollments). The marketplace also recruits to enhance the talent pool in an increasingly competitive global economy.

Schools recognize that students coming from abroad usually need assistance in making the transition into U.S. schools. While many are able to capitalize on available transition programs and on their personal coping abilities, too many experience predictable and preventable problems. This report underscores the international student trends, highlights common transition problems, and discusses the nature and scope of transition supports that policy makers need to ensure are in place for all who come to the U.S. in pursuit of an education.

### **Students Coming to U.S. Schools from Other Countries**

In the U.S., the definition of international students focuses on those enrolled at schools who are not citizens, immigrants, or refugees.<sup>3</sup>

#### **The Trend**

The number has increased steadily for the past few decades with a record high of 764,495 (3.7% of the total higher education enrollment) during the 2011/2012 academic year. Over half of these students are undergraduates. The steady increase is attributed to the growing reputation and visibility of and recruitment in other countries by U.S. institutions of higher education.<sup>4</sup>

Primary and secondary schools are also recruiting abroad.<sup>5</sup> For example, private high schools actively pursue international students, with recruitment especially heavy in East Asia.

### **International Students by Country of Origin**

Students coming to the U.S.A. come from many countries. Ten countries account for 67% of the students, with China, India, and South Korea being the top three countries. Other leading countries include Saudi Arabia, Canada, Taiwan, Japan, Vietnam, Mexico, and Turkey.<sup>6</sup> The total list serves as a reminder that international students represent diverse populations. And while country of origin and ethnic background plays a significant role, other factors are also noteworthy such as age, living arrangements, language ability and cultural exposure, mobility, and so forth.

## **With Whom Do They Live?**

International students of all ages often arrive in the country on their own.<sup>7</sup> For those coming to institutions of higher education, this is somewhat comparable to those domestic students who move from home into dormitories and apartments.

This is not the case for 8 to 17 year old international students. Living away from home contrasts markedly with the experience of most of their domestic peers. Some, often called "Parachute Kids," have been sent by their parents to live with extended family or other caretakers.<sup>8</sup> A categorization<sup>9</sup> of the range of living arrangements made for these young international students indicates they reside

- in boarding schools or private boarding homes
- with unrelated host families/guardians/caretakers<sup>10</sup>
- with paid guardians/caretakers
- with relatives or parents' friends
- by themselves or with siblings in a house or apartment<sup>11</sup>

In a study conducted on foreign-born Chinese adolescent students who are separated from their parents, 36% were found to live with a relative, 30% with a homestay, 5% with family friends, 5 % with siblings, and 3% living completely alone.<sup>12</sup>

A report in the New York Times on the Léman Manhattan Preparatory School, a private school in New York City that admits large number of Chinese students each year, international students are reported as living in luxury studio apartments on Wall Street with a team of house-parents who live in the same buildings.<sup>13</sup>

## **Permanent Residents? Temporary Migrants?**

Unlike those immigrant students who are permanent residents in the country, international students are temporary migrants. Initially most intend to return home. For instance, a 67% of a sample of international students surveyed at the University of Minnesota indicated they would be returning home; only 7.5 % indicated the intent to stay permanently.<sup>14</sup> However, despite initial intent, reports indicate that after graduation a significant proportion do take steps to become permanent immigrants.

The Minnesota survey also examined international students' motivation to stay or return home. Students who stated the intention to return home indicated wanting to rejoin friends and family; the desire to stay was associated with the view that job/career opportunities would be better in the U.S.

## Potential Common Barriers to Successful Transition

In highlighting common transition problems confronted by international students, we urge readers not to lose sight of efforts made by many schools to address potential barriers and the relevance of individual differences in how students cope (e.g., specific strengths that minimize the impact of stressors, vulnerabilities that make coping more difficult).

### Culture Shock

Adapting to a new culture takes time and seldom comes easy. It can be anticipated that most international students experience at least some degree of culture shock as they enter U.S. schools. This will vary in duration and severity, of course, due to individual differences.

For example, students differ in their previous exposure to American culture, institutions, values, and customs and in their English language proficiency. Some have parents who have attended U.S. schools or have worked in the country and are familiar with the culture and educational system. Some have relatives who are residents. Some have visited and vacationed.

Those who come from societies with greater cultural diversity also tend to have exposure to American culture. For example, individuals coming from places such as Hong Kong or Singapore are likely to have experienced Western culture and, since these cities emphasize bilingualism, English language.

The definition and four stages of culture shock as delineated by Oberg many years ago remain useful in understanding transition concerns that need to be addressed.<sup>15</sup> The term is defined as the emotional reactions precipitated by anxiety resulting from loss of familiar social intercourse signs and symbols. The four stages are labeled: honeymoon, crisis, recovery, and adjustment (see sidebar).

#### About Stages of Culture Shock

**Honeymoon:** Characterized as pleasant emotions (e.g., excitement, fascination, exhilaration – akin to a tourist's initial sense of novelty in a new place).

**Crisis:** For some, crises emerge as frustration or even hostility toward the host country arises from continuously experiencing cultural gaps, communication difficulties, adjustment problems, prejudice, discrimination, and so forth.

**Recovery:** Is facilitated by supports that result in relevant learning and successful negotiation of problems (e.g., improvement in English proficiency, enhanced cultural competence).

**Adjustment:** Success in addressing cultural shock is seen when daily experiences no longer trigger anxieties related to the new culture. From Oberg's perspective, international students who successfully adjust can begin to enjoy their daily lives and, upon returning home, may miss the country and even take with them some of the values adopted in the host country.

*Some students  
hold back in  
class to avoid  
losing face*

A common crisis arises when students encounter an academic setting which is extremely different from that of their home country. This sometimes is referred to as academic culture shock. The greater the difference between the education system in the student's country and the system in the U.S., the more likely international students will experience the setting as a bad match for them. For instance, many students will come from schools that emphasize considerable instructor guidance and supervision and group authority and may flounder when confronted with situations involving independent learning, lengthy lectures, and proactive classroom participation. Moreover, to avoid the shame and embarrassment associated with "losing face," some students resist expressing opinions publicly so as not to make mistakes and do not seek assistance to avert appearing incompetent.

As discussed more specifically in the next section, transition interventions can help address all this. In general, such interventions need to start before arrival with a view to preventing problems. A sequence of educational orientations can help minimize culture shock. On arrival, broad-based welcoming and immediate connection with others can help establish and ensure ongoing social supports past the Honeymoon stage. The Honeymoon stage also needs to include education "boosters" to minimize crises. In addition, interventions need to focus on identifying and correcting adjustment problems as soon as feasible. Finally, every crisis experience should be followed with recovery support.

### **Problems with Parent-child Separation**

Lack of parental supervision can be a fundamental barrier to successful transition and subsequent academic performance. Despite frequent phone calls and emails, separation makes it difficult for parents to maintain their influence. Students may selectively disclose what is happening and parents are cut off from adequate monitoring. One information exception usually is a student's grades. However, researchers stress that academic performance is not an adequate indicator of life style changes and overall well-being (e.g., adoption of risky behaviors such as substance abuse).

Prolonged separation can lead to alienation from parents. In turn, this reduces interest in connecting with the parents' social networks in the local community. Such "double isolation," as it has been dubbed, creates and perpetuates a cycle in which international students fail to take advantage of the support system and social capital provided in the local community. Moreover, deprived of positive adult influences, the students are likely to be more vulnerable to negative peer influences and may even turn to gangs for emotional support and security.

## Language Barriers in and out of Classrooms

International students vary widely in their English abilities. Students who come from bilingual schools typically have a high level of English proficiency and relatively few language barriers. Increasing numbers of secondary schools in Asia are implementing bilingual systems where English learning is given top priority in the curriculum. For instance, Kang Chiao Bilingual School, a private K-12 school in Taiwan places bilingualism at the heart of the school's mission and introduces English into the curriculum as early as kindergarten. A significant portion of its graduates go off to study in U.S. universities, some even leave early after junior high school to study in U.S. high schools.<sup>16</sup>

*My teachers speak too fast*

For those who have difficulties with the English language, it can be a major contributing factor in doing poorly in the classroom, especially in classes where the student is expected to comprehend lectures, speak up, write papers, and take essay exams. Moreover, research findings suggest that students with low mastery of English often are seen by peers and teachers as not competent or as not intelligent.<sup>17</sup>

Schools often rely on English proficiency tests to screen students and determine language needs. However, it is commonplace for students to memorize vocabulary and learn test-taking schemes in order to pass the test. As a result, the findings are not good indicators of an individual's ability to communicate in a real world setting (e.g., express ideas, comprehend others). Language in social settings goes beyond the surface meanings of words. So a good vocabulary is no guarantee of understanding underlying implications of what is (and isn't said) or of interpreting accompanying body language cues.

Beside the negative impact on academic performance, language barriers often interfere with students socializing widely on campus. This contributes to not developing supportive friendships and becoming isolated.

Furthermore, language barriers can prevent students from effectively using available resources. For example, barriers in communication between students and their counselors and healthcare providers can reduce access to and effectiveness of services. The impact of language barriers is particularly strong in mental health services where inability to express one's emotions and experiences can lead to inaccurate assessment of one's mental health status.

### **Example of Cultural Differences: High-content vs. High-context Communication**

Communication style in the U.S. emphasizes content. In contrast, many cultures stress the context in which the communication takes place. That is, the same words in these cultures can take on different meanings depending on settings and circumstances and also tend to be more indirect and rely more on nonverbal cues.

## **Performance Pressure**

Most international students feel considerable pressure to perform well. Some of the pressure is because their families have high expectations and many make considerable financial sacrifices for the student's education abroad. It can be anticipated that students will view good grades as the means to meet expectations and "pay back" the debt. Many students also see themselves as representatives of their country and worry poor performance will constitute a national embarrassment. All the performance pressure can lead to a fixation on academic work at the expense of social interactions and finding support.<sup>18</sup>

## **Attitude About Assimilation**

For a variety of reasons, some students may have negative attitudes about assimilating into U.S. culture. This can be another factor contributing to students shying away from interacting with domestic students and can further alienate them from the local community and its social supports and resources.

Then there are students who do assimilate. Some do so proactively; some feel compelled to assimilate in order to be accepted. In either case, this can result in identity confusion and internal conflict.<sup>19</sup>

## **About Younger Students**

Most international students in the U.S. are enrolled in institutions of higher education, and as a result, more attention and resources are directed at them than at those attending primary and secondary schools. However, these younger students certainly are at risk. The vulnerabilities of two subgroups, respectively dubbed "Parachute Kids" and "Third Culture Kids," have been especially noted in the literature.<sup>20</sup>

The term Parachute Kids is used to describe those aged 8 to 17 who are sent to (dropped off in) the U.S. for their schooling. Such students tend to have too little supervision and too much free time. In seeking acceptance by their schoolmates, they often fail to avoid negative peer influences. As a result, some gravitate toward nonproductive and risky behaviors. This can be especially problematic in secondary schools where subgroup affiliations are the expected norm.

The sociologist Ruth Hill Useem coined the term Third Culture Kids (TCKs) to describe "a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside their parent's culture."<sup>21</sup> This usually involves attending school in several different countries. Over the years, such students are seen as integrating facets of their native culture with parts of the foreign cultures they experience to create a unique third culture. Because of their high degree of mobility, some experience a sense of "rootless-ness" and "in-between-ness." And despite the need for social supports, they may refrain from establishing relationships as a way of minimizing grief and loss when moving away.

**Problems  
Related to  
Living  
Arrangements**

Many international students are able to form engaging relationships with their host families and benefit from their experiences, whereas others experience difficulties and may continue to view themselves as outsiders.<sup>22</sup> Hosts may interpret shyness and excessive homesickness as aloofness, negativity, and lack of appreciativeness and thus minimize interaction. Students may spend most of their time on the internet thus limiting connection with hosts. Children of the hosts may react negatively to the visitors for a variety of reasons (e.g., having to share space, being expected to take on host duties, reduced attention to them by their parents). Paid guardians and caretakers may be more interested in the remuneration than in connecting and helping the student.

**Negative  
Impact on  
Mental  
Health  
Becomes  
Another  
Barrier**

The potential consequences of the many barriers have significant mental health implications. Some international students are particularly vulnerable to transition problems because of extreme emotional reactions to separation from home, the loss of family and peer relationships, and the need to start anew in an unfamiliar setting. For some, the experience can produce an intense feeling of grief that exacerbates culture shock.

In such cases, the stress of adapting to a new environment can be overwhelming and make a student even more vulnerable to future stressors. Persistent psychological distress, of course, can lead to detrimental mental and physical consequences. To highlight the general problem, researchers have described a "foreign student syndrome" and an "uprooting disorder." The former term refers to high levels of anxiety related problems; "uprooting disorder" is defined in terms of "identifiable psychological symptoms of alienation, nostalgia, depression, and sense of helplessness."<sup>23</sup>

**Cultural Differences Related to Mental Illness:  
Western vs. Eastern Symptom Manifestation and Service Use<sup>24</sup>**

In responding to mental health concerns of international students, it is essential to be aware of differences in symptom manifestation. For example, with respect to depression, rather than the psychological symptoms (e.g., feelings of guilt, suicidal ideation, worthlessness, self-recrimination) found in Western culture, students from areas such as East Asia express somatic and vegetative symptoms (e.g., sleep disturbance, loss of appetite, weight loss, loss of sexual interest).

One possible explanation for the differences: the tendency for non-western individuals to reveal only their physical symptoms despite the presence of psychological symptoms because they consider the physical symptoms more legitimate and worthy of reporting. Another explanation sees the difference in terms of contrasting views about mind and body (e.g., somatization of psychological symptoms and lack of emotional expressiveness among East Asians is seen as stemming from a belief in the unity of mind and body).

The stigma surrounding mental illnesses that exists in the U.S. is strong in East Asian cultures and is a barrier to seeking mental health services. Moreover, cultural values make sharing personal and family information with strangers taboo. And , of course, communication barriers also interfere with help-seeking.

## Supports for Transition

"It's not enough to just provide orientation and give them the basics. We need to look beyond orientation -- how do we continue to meet their needs once the 'honeymoon period' has worn off? Getting used to a new culture and a new academic system can be quite challenging."

Darla Deardorff, Executive Director  
Association of International Education Administrators

Most schools that recruit international students offer interventions to enable successful transitions. While the efforts vary in nature and scope, there are commonalities and there are weaknesses. What follows is both a synthesis and expansion of what schools need to focus on in providing transition supports.<sup>25</sup>

*Immigration and Enrollment.* For many students and their families, the transition process begins with navigating immigration and enrollment hurdles. Schools can play a role in providing essential information in ways that ensure it is received and understood. This should include a process that outlines *Frequently Asked Questions* and provides answers and a person to contact for further information. Foreign language, long-distance, and cultural concerns must be addressed. Some schools make personal outreach phone calls at this stage.

*Living Arrangements.* This requires not only information and practical assistance, but exploration and counseling about what will be the best match for each student given individual differences.

*Encouraging Ongoing Family Engagement.* Families need to be offered specific information on how to provide ongoing guidance and support in ways that enhance the student's coping and encourage personal independence and responsibility.

*Foreign language,  
long-distance, and  
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must be addressed*

*Academic Advising.* Initial academic advising provides a best estimate starting point. An early follow-up should be scheduled to determine if modifications are needed, and students should be encouraged to seek revisions in their academic plan at any time they are experiencing problems.

*Orientation Activities.* Orientation is not a one shot intervention. In effect, all the above transition interventions have begun the orientation process. Upon arrival, newcomers should be greeted with broad-based and personalized welcoming activities. Education efforts and tours enhance basic information about the school and services and about how to minimize culture shock. The main emphasis is on welcoming and support. Messages that mainly convey cautions and rules should be kept to an essential minimum to avoid increasing anxiety. To ease the transition, some schools offer special online preparation courses. Some offer summer courses and institutes for in-depth orientation and to facilitate initial acculturation.

*Ensure social support*

*Social Support.* There should be a continuous emphasis on developing a socially supportive school community. Particular attention must be given to establishing immediate social support connections that will be maintained beyond the Honeymoon stage. Connecting the newcomer with a couple of peer buddies can be a good starting point. Connections should be made with both domestic students and other international students who have made a successful transition to the school and surrounding community. Staff advocate, peer counselor, and mentor programs also can be helpful. The aim, of course, is to empower students – not enhance dependency.

*Personalize and accommodate*

*Language Accommodation.* Some workshops and accommodations are essential for those students having language difficulties.

*Induction.* In addition to the above, induction strategies should encompass personal introductions, ongoing assistance with course enrollments, personal invitations to join in activities, special workshops to enhance coping skills and stress management, and so forth. The strategies are meant to reduce stress and enhance understanding and support and to do so without overwhelming the newcomer.

*Prevent problems*

*Prevention of Problems.* At the same time, since many crises that may emerge for international students can be anticipated, systemic steps should be taken to prevent or at least minimize them. For example, some students will become homesick; some will encounter hostility from peers; others will become overly stressed; too much unengaged time also can lead to trouble. The school should plan system-wide strategies for countering these problems. These would include but not be limited to helping the student anticipate and learn ways to prevent or at least minimize such crises.

*Monitor for problems and intervene early*

*Early Intervention for Problems.* As students settle in, interventions need to focus on identifying and correcting language difficulties and adjustment problems as soon as feasible. Should a crisis be experienced, recovery support is indicated. Early intervention may encompass various academic supports, professionally-led support groups, and culturally-sensitive individual counseling.

*Support transitions to higher levels of education, to careers, and to returning home*

*Articulation to the Next Academic Level.* While all the above may not be in play, academic counseling and orientations are common supports for international students moving from grade to grade and to higher levels of schooling. Always of concern is how to ensure these are well-implemented and received.

*End of Stay.* Finally, as students come to the end of their stay in the U.S., attention should be given to helping them deal with potential emotional reactions to leaving and to returning home.

Special attention should be given to the various ways advanced technology can aid in all this. And clearly every transition program needs to find better ways to address student diversity.

## Concluding Comments

As schools across the U.S. recruit increasing numbers of international students, greater attention must be paid to improving how barriers to a successful transition are addressed. Many of the barriers are predictable and preventable. Moreover, many schools have laid a good foundation upon which to enhance a set of interventions that will improve the transition process not only for international students but for all students.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See the accompanying list of resources for the references from which the material in this report is drawn. The following notes cite specific references to acknowledge the source for specific facts and topics; see the resource list for full citations.

<sup>2</sup> OECD (2012).

<sup>3</sup> World Education Services (2007).

<sup>4</sup> *Institution of International Education*.

<sup>5</sup> Sharif (1994); also see Canfield (2011).

<sup>6</sup> *Institution of International Education*.

<sup>7</sup> Tienda & Haskins (2011).

<sup>8</sup> Zhou (1998); also see Chiang-Hom (2004) and Tsong & Liu (2009).

<sup>9</sup> Lin (1998).

<sup>10</sup> It is common for schools that recruit international students to develop host family networks from the families of domestic students enrolled in their schools. Nonprofit, non-governmental international exchange organizations such as *CIEE* and *AFS* bring thousands of exchange students yearly into the homes across America. CIEE states that: “Participating families range from those with children of various ages to those with no children, as well as from those with both parents to those with a single parent. ... These programs carry out comprehensive matching processes to ensure optimal fit between students and the host families and supervise students' stay through monthly communication by the local support team.” See CIEE at <http://www.ciee.org/> ; See AFS at <http://www.afsusa.org/>

<sup>11</sup> Although illegal for minors to be living alone without an adult in the U.S., data from a study by Chiang-Hom (2004) suggests that 8% of minor international students live only with their siblings or completely alone. For example, parents settle these minors into purchased homes, usually in upscale middle-class neighborhoods to ensure good quality schools. In some instances, the neighborhood is chosen because it has a network of adults from similar backgrounds to those of the parents who are willing to provide occasional care and supervision for the students. While parents may frequently come to the U.S. to visit their children, for the most part these young students spend a significant amount of time living alone.

<sup>12</sup> Chiang-Hom (2004); Tsong & Liu (2009).

<sup>13</sup> Spencer (2013).

<sup>14</sup> Hazan & Alberts (2006).

<sup>15</sup> Oberg (1960).

<sup>16</sup> See Kang Chiao Bilingual School website [http://www.kcbs.ntpc.edu.tw/en/about\\_missionstatement.html](http://www.kcbs.ntpc.edu.tw/en/about_missionstatement.html)

<sup>17</sup> Pranata, Foo-Kune, & Rodolfa (2006).

<sup>18</sup> Pranata, Foo-Kune, & Rodolfa (2006)

<sup>19</sup> The term *Multiphrenia* is used to label the state of confusion that arises from having multiple conflicting and fragmented self-identities (seen as stemming from the complex and mobile social world). See Gergen (1991). Also see Grimshaw & Sears (2008) who cite Murphy (2003) as stating that “Multiphrenia may be experienced by international students who are compelled to become assimilated through feeling ‘own-culture deprivation’ and the ‘clouding of their cultural identity’ as they struggle to find the balance between native and foreign cultures.”

<sup>20</sup> Zhou (1998); Chiang-Hom (2004); Tsong & Liu (2009). Discussed in Suárez-Orozco, Bang, & Kim (2011).

<sup>21</sup> Useem & Downie (1976). Also see discussions in Cockburn (2002), Grimshaw & Sears (2008), Natario (2011), and Pollock, VanReken, & Pflüger (2001).

<sup>22</sup> On the AFS website see “Common concerns from host families”  
[http://www.afswiki.org/index.php/Common\\_concerns\\_from\\_host\\_families](http://www.afswiki.org/index.php/Common_concerns_from_host_families)  
Also see Zhou (1998).

<sup>23</sup> Sandhu (1995). Also see Kleinman (2004), Leong & Lee (2006), Mak, Chen, Lam, & Yiu (2009), Pranata, Foo-Kune, & Rodolfa (2006). Also see our Center’s Online Clearinghouse Quick Find on *Immigrant Students and Mental Health* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/immigrantkids.htm>

<sup>24</sup> This is discussed in many articles and books. See, for example, Draguns & Tanaka-Matsumi (2003); Park & Kim (2008); Park-Saltzman, Wada, & Mogami (2012); Kim, Yang, Atkinson, Wolfe, & Hong (2001).

<sup>25</sup> For more on the topic of supports for transitions, see our Center’s Online Clearinghouse Quick Finds:  
> *Transition Programs/Grade Articulation/Welcome*  
[http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p2101\\_01.htm](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p2101_01.htm)  
> *Transition to College*  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/transitiontocollege.htm>

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Also see our Center's Online Clearinghouse Quick Finds:  
> *Transition Programs/Grade Articulation/Welcome*  
[http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p2101\\_01.htm](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p2101_01.htm)  
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