

International Students and the Added Challenges of the COVID-19 Pandemic

School systems are not responsible, for meeting every need of their students. But when the need directly affects learning, the school must meet the challenge.

Carnegie Task Force on Education

The general difficulties of international students studying in the United States have been well documented (see reference list). The COVID-19 pandemic added additional challenges.

Living and studying in a foreign country requires coping and resilience. Some international students adapt quickly and well. Others may experience considerable transitional and even ongoing difficulties in adjusting to life at a school abroad, especially when they are alone in a new country. The challenges can include culture shock, language barriers, accommodation problems, homesickness, and outgroup bias and discrimination to name a few.

Acculturation: the process of adjustment and adaptation to a new culture. International students lacking internal and external resources for acculturation are more vulnerable to the many stressors they encounter. These students not only need to adapt academically (e.g., taking classes in a foreign language, coping with new styles of teaching), they also must deal with the multiple facets of culture shock and a variety of mental health related concerns (Berry, 2005; Bista & Gaulee, 2017; Chun, Chesla, & Kwan, 2011).

With the COVID-19 pandemic, educational institutions took action to protect students and staff. However, many did not do well in addressing the special needs of international students (Chen, et al., 2020). This probably also was the case for other marginalized groups.

International students on our campus at UCLA have told us they and their parents have experienced a dearth of COVID-19 guidance and support which has resulted in a loss of institutional confidence, credibility, trust and feelings of unsafe conditions. They state that there was little outreach to families and too little attention to multi-language communication. This apparently has led to the reported drops in enrollment. (The Pew Research Center indicates international student enrollment at U.S. universities fell 15% in the 2020-21 school year).

Added Challenges Arising from the Pandemic

While the move to online instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic was challenging for most instructors and students, it expanded the challenges experienced by international students. One basic concern was whether to stay or go back home when a campus shutdown.

Stay Those staying had to find off campus living spaces in a short amount of time. Social distancing left many detached from social support, feeling quite isolated, and “with less access to public resources due to monetary, informational, language, or cultural barriers” (Chen et al., 2020). Students also were concerned about the health of family members back home. For some, their stress was compounded by racial animosity, conflict, and personal attacks. Asian students were especially targeted because of attributions about the source of COVID-19 (Crawford et al., 2020).

*The material in this document reflects work done by Amanda Gong as a participant with the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA in 2021.

The center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project, Dept. of Psychology, UCLA. Website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>

Leave

Those leaving encountered the high cost of traveling, increasingly strict international travel bans and updated visa policies with complicated paperwork, and requirements for proof about COVID status. And these student carried with them worries about whether they would be allowed to return. Once back home some experienced additional challenges with online course work (e.g., time difference forced them to take synchronous online courses at hours that disrupted their sleep and biological clocks).

A study by Lai and colleagues (2020) reports:

A total of 124 full-time international university students (36.3% male) were included: 75.8% had returned to their home country or region for reasons related to COVID-19; ... Compared with returnees, stayers had significantly higher stress from COVID-19-related stressors such as personal health and lack of social support ..., higher perceived stress, and more severe insomnia symptoms ..., with moderate-to-large effect sizes. Compared with males, females reported significantly higher stress from uncertainties about academic program ... with a small effect size. In the total sample, stress related to academics (e.g., personal attainment, uncertainties about academic program, and changes in teaching/learning format), health (including personal health and health of family and friends), availability of reliable COVID-19-related information, and lack of social support predicted more negative mental health impacts. Resilience, positive thinking, and exercise were predictors of less severe mental health impacts.

Returning to School*

Under normal circumstances, back-to-school can be stressful. Most students can handle the stress if it is experienced as a moderate amount of anxiety; it is even considered a source of motivation.

However, while data are still being gathered, it is widely concluded the pandemic has increased vulnerability to mental health problems and has made returning to school increasingly stressful. For international students, the added stress compounds the challenges they already experience and adds to their mental health vulnerability. And all this is exacerbated when the students are not aware of or are reluctant to pursue professional supports that can promote well-being.

International Students and Student Counseling Services

Language can be a great barrier for international students seeking mental health assistance. It is hard enough for some to talk with a mental health professional; it is even harder to communicate when English is one's second language. In addition, it can be a problem if the counselor is not familiar with the student's culture (e.g., cultural syndromes, idioms, and explanations). The professional literature emphasizes the need for mental health professionals to "speak the language of the client", both linguistically and in terms of the client's dominant concepts and metaphors.

*As the coronavirus (COVID-19) impacts international students, the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) closely monitors key developments and provides information and important updates <https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/covid-19-resources> .

Outgroup Bias

Long-standing calls for diversity and cultural competence training have been a major focus for those trying to counter prejudice and discrimination against those outside the “majority” group (Cross, 1989). For example, see the work of Georgetown University’s National Center of Cultural Competence (<https://nccc.georgetown.edu/>). The mission of that center is “to increase the capacity of health care and mental health care programs to design, implement, and evaluate culturally and linguistically competent service delivery systems to address growing diversity, persistent disparities, and to promote health and mental health equity.” The center provides self-assessments and regular leadership institutes.

Another emphasis has been on the benefits of diversity. Available research supports the view that cultural, racial, and socioeconomic diversity in schools can produce academic, cognitive, social, emotional, economic, and civic benefits (The Century Foundation, 2019).

Concluding Comments

The COVID-19 pandemic once again has underscored the need for greater attention to ensuring effective supports are in place for international students. In emphasizing that international students and their families raise special concerns for schools, we hope it is obvious that many of the concerns overlap with those of others who require student and learning supports to enable them to succeed at school. As schools cope with groups that are potentially vulnerable, such as international students, there are opportunities to improve student and learning supports for *all* students.

With a view to enhancing the coping ability, resilience, and well-being of all students, education institutions must provide effective supports for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and for promoting well-being. Special attention must be paid to transition supports, continued development of coping skills, promoting resilience, connecting with families, and ensuring culturally appropriate assistance for learning and emotional concerns.

Note: Our Center has documented the trend to enact piecemeal and fragmented policies and practices related to specific subgroups of students and types of problems (see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html>). Our work stresses commonalities in the underlying dynamics causing learning, behavior, and emotional problems. From this perspective, we have developed a prototype for a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of supports for all students to address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage those disconnected from learning at school. No subgroup is ignored or marginalized. Rather, the aim is to directly address a wide range of underlying factors interfering with students benefitting from good instruction and to do so in a way that avoids fragmentation, redundancy, and counterproductive competition for sparse resources.

For a couple other Center resources that provide a perspective on this topic, see

>*International Students: Understanding and Addressing Problems Experienced During the Pandemic* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/intstud.pdf>

>*Being an International Student in the U.S.A.: In Her Own Words*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/internationalstud.pdf>

For an example of current efforts by Universities to answer common questions and share helpful resources as a support for international students related to the COVID-19 pandemic, see Berkeley International Office (BIO) webpage at

<https://internationaloffice.berkeley.edu/covid-19-updates-faq>

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Also see our Center's online Quick Finds at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/quicksearch.htm>

Here's a sample of related ones:

- >Immigrant Students and Mental Health <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qp/immigrantkids.htm>
- >Diversity, Disparities, and Promoting Equity <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qp/diversity.htm>
- >English Language Learner <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qp/culturecomp.htm>
- >International links to M.H. in Schools <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qp/mhinternational.html>