International Students:
Understanding and Addressing Problems Experienced During the Pandemic

By the end of 2020, more than 1,000,000 international students were registered to study at all levels of schooling in the U.S. International students enrolled in U.S. schools always have had transition challenges. Examples include cultural differences, English as a second language, and living away from family and friends. Now, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated their situation dramatically. This resource highlights some of the problems international students are experiencing and actions schools can take.

Problems Related to Online Learning

Online instruction has complicated the lives of all involved. For many international students, there are added problems. Those admitted to U.S. schools can only enter the country to take classes on campus. And with the outbreak of COVID-19 and online instruction, a significant number of those already here have returned to their home countries while taking online classes. Major time zone differences often mean they have to sacrifice sleep time to attend live lectures. Given that research consistently cautions that factors interfering with adequate sleep have a negative impact on school performance, the potential impact is clear.

Another problem is internet instability. Such technical problems often interfere with students successfully joining class discussions. This exacerbates the difficulties many international students already experience related to switching from lecture-based education system in their home countries to the discussion-based system in the United States.

Cut-off from Cultural & Social Experiences

Living back home and taking online classes also reduces opportunities for students to practice English, especially spoken English, and to experience and learn from U.S. culture. We note that a common reason students choose to study outside their home countries is to experience another culture in an immersive manner (e.g., through making local friends, involvement in on-campus clubs, organizations, and other activities, sightseeing). Students who stayed in the U.S. during the pandemic, of course, also were cut-off from many experiences due to calls to stay at home and travel restrictions.

Reduced social interactions also affect students' development and well-being. Live online interactions provide only limited opportunities for social interaction, and recorded classes eliminate even these. Special concern has been raised that the pandemic will make it harder for returning international students to restore previous friendships and make new ones.

Discrimination

Racial differentiation and discrimination can be another facet of culture shock for many from single-race countries. Even before the pandemic, studies revealed that international students, particularly non-Whites, reported feeling discriminated against at U.S. schools. The pandemic clearly has increased xenophobia and is making it harder for international students to cope.

Financial Impact

International students commonly pay 2 to 3 times more than local students. Around 60% of education abroad is funded by their families; the percentage is even higher if we exclude graduate students funded by universities. In general, scholarships or financial aids for the international community are scarce.

Along with other students, many international students staying in the U.S. during the pandemic have needed emergency financial support. For example, a survey done at 520 U.S. institutions of higher education in the summer of 2020 indicated that 46% of dormitories and student housing were closed. For students unable or not wanting to go home, this meant increased costs related to off-campus housing, meals, commuting, and other incidentals. The survey also found that only 42% of participating schools provided emergency funding for international student. Concerns have been raised that such financial problems could result in students dropping out of school or choosing not to study abroad. It is noteworthy that about half of the institutions that participated in the above survey indicated that their application numbers for the 20-21 academic year dropped.

Health Problems

As widely discussed, physical and mental health problems have emerged and existing conditions have been exacerbated during the pandemic, with individual differences in impact related to personal experiences. In addition to factors already mentioned, stress and unhappiness are commonly reported in relation to (a) remote study and diminished academic opportunities, (b) limited outdoor activity due orders to stay home and mandatory quarantines, (c) loss of internships and jobs, (d) personal health problems and family-related issues, (e) travel restrictions, and more. One survey during pandemic reported that 70% of higher education students reported experiencing increased anxiety and stress.

What Schools Should Do?

Although they share overlapping origins and backgrounds, international students differ from immigrant students in fundamental ways, and the pandemic made the differences more salient. Student and learning supports must reflect the differences. Our Center has a variety of center-developed resources and links to others that discuss what schools can do to enhance student and learning supports for all, including international student (see the reference list). Here we will just highlight a few topics.

Supports for Transitions

For international students, transition supports to the U.S. need to go beyond initial orientations. Besides the massive amount of new information to be learned, the pandemic has caused frequent changes in status that require support. Schools often have resources that many international students aren't aware of or don't know how to access. In addition, some students come from countries where seeking supports for personal concerns is not culturally approved. At a minimum, schools need to outreach regularly and personally to inform and invite students to access transition supports (e.g., during the pandemic, this mean regular use of email, establishing internet links to resources, offering zoom contacts).

Offering Online Activities	Accessible online activities and sessions are essential resources to provide international students during the pandemic. Given group and individual differences, common forms of grouping can be used (e.g., needs-based, interest-based, designed-diversity groupings). For instance, needs-based grouping allows students from the same country to share experiences, while designed-diversity grouping can encourage interpersonal exchanges that help students learn new information and embrace new culture. Schools can also help student organizations connect and promote their activities to international students, even to those outside the U.S.
Mental Health Counseling	Schools realize that the pandemic has increased the number of students experiencing mental health concerns. Some schools offer mental health counseling; others are making referrals. While many students are reluctant to access such counseling, reluctance can be greater among international students who come from cultures that don't approve of seeking mental health help. Schools that have access to counselors from similar backgrounds or with international experiences may be more successful with these young people. At any rate, schools are finding their way to incorporate telemental health.
Academic Supports & Counseling	The COVID-19 school disruptions have highlighted the need for flexible teaching, including adjustments related to different time zones, a range of special accommodations, increased access to remote resources and tutoring, distance academic counseling, and more. Student support staff have a particular role to play in addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students. International students highlight the importance for such personnel to understand what these young people are experiencing and ensuring that schools provide essential supports.
Financial Support	The COVID-19 pandemic increased the importance of schools reaching out to students to learn about their need for financial support. Minimally, a comprehensive list of resources can be created by school districts and published online or sent out to students. Such a list should include potential internal and external sources of grants and financial aid available to international students. Schools can also support international students efforts to access affordable housing, meals, and other necessities.
Family/ Community Connection	Homesickness and loneliness are among the major factors that negatively influence international students' academic success. The pandemic has added concern about family and friends at home catching the virus. Outreach designed to engage international families, of course, is not only important during the pandemic but at all times. As schools outreach to students and their families, the focus is on providing regular updates and identifying concerns. The emphasis during the pandemic is on offering online events and meetings, as well as regular written communications via email and the postal service. All outreach to international families calls for recognition that they may be less familiar with the system of schooling and life in the U.S., especially when they are from non-Western countries, and there may be language and cultural barriers. (If needed and possible, language translations are desirable.)

Concluding Comments

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic will be long-lasting. The pandemic has highlighted the need to find better ways to address student diversity and has underscored various ways advanced technology can be a resource.

In emphasizing that international students and their families raise special concerns for schools, we also want to stress 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.

Our Center's research documents the trend to enact piecemeal and fragmented policies and practices related to specific subgroups of students and types of problems. We recognize 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 to address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students. 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.

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