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Multicultural Development through Facilitating Support Groups for International Students

Kyoung Mi Choi, PhD, NCC, LPC, Anne M. Cadle, Ruthie Madden, & Ronald A. Markowitz, Jr.

In 2001, I came to the United States as an international student holding a F-1 student visa, which I held until I started teaching at **Youngstown State University**. Being an international student over 10 years has really influenced not only on my values and worldviews but also my personality, interpersonal communication style, and sense of belonging.

Before my arrival at the John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York, 2011, what I knew about American culture was pretty much from popular American television series such as *Beverly Hills, 90210* and *Friends*. I naively believed that was what I was going to experience in America. Obviously, it did not happen. After two months from my first day in the U.S., I witnessed the September 11 attacks through a big screen TV in a college cafeteria. Some of my classmates from the Middle Eastern countries repatriated to their countries without completing their programs. In 2003, the student and exchange visitor information system (SEVIS) was required by all schools and programs in the U.S. hosting international students and scholars to monitor personal information and transits. Visiting home became more difficult for many international students.

In addition to my own first-hand cross-cultural experience, I had an opportunity to learn more about **diverse experiences of international students in a professional setting**. In 2005, I started working at the International Center for Services at Syracuse University as a Graduate Assistant throughout my doctoral program. My role was providing individual and group counseling for international students from 120 different countries and developing various support programs. The stories and experiences shared by other international students have expanded my understanding of the uniqueness and challenge of international students in the U.S. There have been endless social, cultural, and political changes over the years that have affected my cultural adjustment process. However, when I looked back on my cross-cultural journey, I remembered many meaningful relationships, which I was fortunate to establish with my faculty, staff, American and international friends, and local community members. I truly believe that I would not be here without their open hearts and helping hands.

In 2013, my personal and professional passion for reaching out to international students as well as a great support from the Counseling, Special Education and School Psychology department have led me to initiate a collaborative project. The **International Student Support Groups were implemented by collaboration** with the Office of Housing & Residence Life, the Reading & Study Skills Center, the Center for International Studies and Programs, and the English Language Institute at Youngstown State University. Graduate counseling students were invited to become group leaders to facilitate a psycho-educational group for international students once a week throughout Spring 2013 (pilot). **Six master's level counseling students interested in learning about multiculturalism and international students joined the project**. By the end of the spring semester, all group leaders in the project disclosed their growth in multicultural knowledge, skills and awareness and strong desire to continue the project.

During summer 2013, extensive recruitment and collaboration efforts were put into place. In the beginning of fall 2013, The International Student Support Groups became Global Perspectives (GP). The objectives of GP were to: **(1)** provide an opportunity for the students to develop multicultural knowledge, awareness, and skills; **(2)** offer an experiential learning opportunity in which the students apply group counseling skills and techniques; and **(3)** assist international students to make a smooth cultural social adjustment to the U.S. campus. Now, we have three groups running Monday through Thursday with seven group leaders. Four academic workshops have been developed by collaboration with the Reading and Study Skills Center.

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Current group leaders have shared their experiences facilitating support groups.

Ruthie, a second year graduate student in Student Affairs & College Counseling

After growing up in a small town and attending a high school with minimal diversity, working with international students became very appealing to me. From my experience being a co-leader of an international student support group, I have found that **I am benefitting from our meetings just as much as the members**. I am learning the norms and traditions of cultures that I may have never been exposed to in my life. It is truly rewarding to witness international students learning about American culture and improving their English just from attending our short, one-hour sessions. In one of our first sessions, a student from Vietnam was talking about the hard time she has had adjusting to American food. She really opened my eyes to an obstacle many international students face. After our meeting, I remembered there was a Vietnamese restaurant close to the university. I emailed the student and provided her with a link to the restaurant's website; she responded with excitement that she would be able to eat her favorite food so many miles away from her home! Overall, it is extremely gratifying to be able to provide international students with resources that will help them to succeed in our country.

Anne, a second year graduate student in School Counseling

I was excited that my group was all from Saudi Arabia because I've read many books and did a project on the country during my undergraduate career. **I'm excited to learn more about their county and culture** and expand my knowledge since I already have some background. I learned that sometimes I focus too much on trying to understand their accent. When in reality if I relax a little bit instead of focusing so hard on how they talk, I will actually be able to understand them. I feel it's going to take a lot of practice.

Ronald, a second year graduate student in Student Affairs & College Counseling

My second semester working with GP is much different than the first. I went into the program last semester with no knowledge of the needs of an international student. I can now happily say that I am leading my own group this semester. **I can actually witness the growth that I have accomplished** over the past couple of months. I thought starting in the program that language barriers would be the biggest problem for me. I have actually come to find out it is the biggest worry for international students too! My co-leader and I have established a group where students feel comfortable talking about these issues and developing solutions with them. The thanks that I get after meetings for simply taking the time to have a conversation about intimidating or difficult subjects makes the effort worthwhile.

Concluding Thoughts

As a result of globalization, the number of students from diverse cultural backgrounds entering schools and universities in the U.S. has been increasing each year. It is crucial for the counseling graduate students to have a good understanding of the unique needs, challenges, and strengths of international students and be equipped to work effectively with them. As the semester continues, I expect to see significant growth among the group leaders in terms of multicultural knowledge, sensitivity, and skills, which can be also transferrable to other social and professional settings.