

Adaptation Challenges for UCSB International Students

Presentation by Dr. Isabella Lin-Roark, Psychologist

International Students Luncheon

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Over the past four years, the University of California at Santa Barbara (UCSB) has experienced an increased enrollment of international students at the undergraduate and graduate levels and in the Education Abroad Program (from 1,049 students in fall 2009 to 1,608 in fall 2013). Eighty-two countries are currently represented at UCSB, with 74% of international students from Asia, mostly from China. Given these rising numbers, it becomes increasingly critical to examine international students' adjustment to their new environment, especially concerning barriers in adapting to the UCSB setting.

There are three major contributing factors to international students' adaptation challenges at UCSB: (a) language difficulties, (b) different communication styles, and (c) the long process of adapting to American culture. Firstly, with respect to language difficulties, students whose native language differs significantly from English may experience long-term struggles mastering the English language, particularly when it comes to sentence structure and connotations in the English language. Secondly, some international students include more context and background information when speaking to provide a more holistic view. This is in contrast to the English communication style, which is more direct and assertive. Thirdly, the long process of adapting to American culture require learning new ways of doing things while also unlearning old ways of living and surviving. To learn and practice American ways of living would require a tremendous amount of time and effort.

Some of these language and communication difficulties manifest in cross-cultural encounters when faculty and domestic students overestimate the language ability of international students, resulting in misunderstandings. Therefore, it is important to reduce the negative impact in cross-cultural encounters by checking for accuracy, giving students more time to respond, and having students write down what they want to say. Although both international students and faculty make good effort, still more can be done. Facilitating cross-cultural adaptation requires psychological preparation, empathy, guidance, and patience.

At the UCSB counseling center, two controversial issues often arise: (a) academic challenges and (b) dating and sex. Different academic expectations may result in disappointment. For example, if a student is accustomed to being a recipient of knowledge and information from the teacher, their learning style may lead their UCSB instructor to think the student does not contribute ideas. International students may feel anxious in discussions sections or small classes where their teachers expect students to engage in conversations. In some cases, international students have ideas but do not know when to chime in to the conversation. It may not be realistic to expect an international student to engage in critical thinking and sharing when that student has not been provided training in that skill prior to UCSB. Possible solutions to this issue may include providing direct guidance, communicating expectations more clearly, or increasing flexibility.

The second controversial issue, sex and dating, occurs when foreign countries send students who lack knowledge about sex or who have no sexual experience before coming to UCSB. Without knowledge or experience, these students may become easy targets and be placed in vulnerable situations. If a student dates a student from another country with different values, there might be confusion about physical intimacy. In addition, situations that involve teaching assistants can be troublesome if students come from a country that holds teachers in high regard. Students may find it difficult to say no to a TA, and if the TA is sexually aggressive, students may have more difficulty protecting themselves.

Question & Answer

Question: There is coaching at the student level, but is coaching available to faculty members? Are faculty primed for what to expect from international students?

Answer: Dr. Lin-Roark shared that faculty do request workshops or do request to meet with other faculty/staff members and students, but there are no regular formal meetings or in-services. Dr. Roark has worked closely with Office of International Students and Scholars (OISS) this year. Gevirtz school is the only department on campus (besides Educational Opportunity Program [EOP]) to have a gathering or discussion about international students and scholars, and so the invitation to be part of GGSE is wonderful. They have also been requested by another academic department on campus to give a similar talk. Counseling and Psychological Services provide consultations, so requests can be made on their website or individually.

Question, Dr. Andrés Consoli: How can we do a collective intervention? We need to grapple with how to both meet each other somewhere. The main concern is that a lot of the emphasis is on international students adapting and changing.

Answer: Dr. Lin-Roark provided an example of a meeting about sexual assault where it is difficult for other people without extensive contact with international students to understand. Staff and faculty on campus can understand international students if they communicate enough. Staff and faculty need to be persistent and consistent in making efforts to understand. Dr. Hsiu-Zu Ho made plans for the winter quarter for small breakout groups of students and staff to discuss the challenges and strategies of international students.