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Enhancing Counseling Services for International Students

7. EXPANDING THE SCOPE OF COUNSELING SERVICES

Designing counseling services requires counselors to consider the emerging needs of international students at various stages of cross-cultural transition. Students have specific needs during the transition of entering the new culture as they begin their academic program and face new situations and new ways of interacting. As international students master early demands and learn about the local culture, their counseling issues also change in focus. Likewise, as students begin to prepare for leaving the host country and returning home, the nature of the issues that are relevant for counseling are often related to re-entry. Counseling services need to take into consideration the shifting concerns of international students and consider how their services can be organized to be responsive. This requires counselors to move “beyond narrowly defined methods and contexts” (Pedersen, 1991, p. 29) and take a dynamic approach to the design and delivery of counseling services.

7.1 Directions for Counseling Services

There are four dimensions or avenues that have been identified to systematically organize counseling services for international students (Hammer, 1992). First, services need to adopt a “problems focus” which addresses the pragmatic needs of students that are often heightened during the initial stage of cross-cultural transition, i.e., housing, course selection, employment and financial matters. Second, a “counseling focus” requires international students to have access to culturally competent counselors and advisors who are willing to work with students in a variety of formats including individual counseling, psychoeducational workshops, and support groups. Third, “interaction and communication focus” supports international students to connect with other students through co-national, bicultural, and
multicultural networks on campus. Peer training and the involvement of other international students are important programming components. Services in this avenue should also consider support for local students who are interested in pursuing meaningful relationships with international students. Local students may need training to help them appreciate the influence of culture on interpersonal relationships and to help them appreciate the interpersonal issues faced by international students (Arthur, 1997). This also enhances the probability that cultural learning in bi-cultural relationships will be reciprocated. Fourth, a “culture learning focus” involves services that support internationalizing the local context, including lectures, discussions, and tours (Hammer, 1992). Again, an essential feature of services is to encourage reciprocal learning between international students and the individuals they interact with on campus and in the local community.

7.1.1 Expanding Counselor Roles

Counselors have a pivotal role to play in the design and delivery of services in each of these four avenues. Undoubtedly, the majority of their time and their central role involve the “counseling focus”. However, to limit services to that role ignores the expertise that counselors can bring to a coordinated and systematic approach to service design and delivery (Sandu, 1994). As outlined in Chapter 5, counselors can serve as consultants to other student services and academic personnel about ways to increase the responsiveness to international students’ needs. Counselors can also gain valuable understanding about international students through participating and offering their services in domains that have traditionally been considered outside of the “counseling focus.” In turn, it is through contact with counselors, or during service delivery in the other three domains, that international students decide to pursue counseling offered through individual or group programming. The profile that counselors hold in campus internationalization supports referral of international students to counseling services. Both academic and support staff need to be informed about the ways that counselors can assist international students. One of the most important goals of any counseling intervention with international students is to help them strengthen their network of social support (Chen, 1999; Martin & Harrell, 1996; Mori, 2000). Counselors can serve as “cultural brokers” for linking students with sources of formal and informal social support on campus. Consequently, counselors need to have a campus network of resource people who demonstrate cross-cultural sensitivity and interest in international students (Siegel, 1991).

The discussion in this chapter focuses on ways to enhance direct delivery of counseling services to international students through individual or