



# Asian International Students' Adjustment Challenges

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## Who Are Asian International Students?

During the 2011-12 academic year, the international student enrollment was 764,495 or about 3.7% of the total U.S. Higher Education enrollment. Of this group, about 64% were Asian and represented 32 different Asian countries. China, India, and South Korea are the top three countries that send the most international students to the U.S.<sup>1</sup>

Asian international students contribute to the U.S. higher education through their financial contributions by expenditures on tuition and living expenses.<sup>1</sup> They also enrich the higher education experience by bringing cultural and intellectual diversity.<sup>2,3</sup>

## What Are the Theoretical Models to Understand Asian International Student Adjustment?

Two types of theoretical models, **Stage Models** and **Type Models**, may be useful in understanding Asian international students' adjustment process.

**Stage Models** suggest that Asian international students start their life in the U.S. with positive energy and attitude, then become more stressed due to the negative experiences and challenges, and then finally more realistic after being adjusted. The **Culture Shock Model**<sup>4</sup>, **U-Curve Model**<sup>5</sup>, and **W-Curve Model**<sup>6</sup> are examples of stage models. For example, the Culture Shock Model has 4 stages of adjustment, *Honeymoon*, *Crisis*, *Recovery*, and *Adjustment*. Asian international students are likely to experience a higher degree of culture shock than other international students from Western countries. It is important to acknowledge, however, that some Asian international students may skip or reverse some of the stages.<sup>7</sup>



**Type Models** emphasize styles and attitudes of individuals moving through the adjustment process. The most prominent type model of adjustment is the **Acculturation Model**. Acculturation can be defined as adjustment and change in individuals and their cultures when individuals with different backgrounds come in contact with each other. For instance, **Berry's Acculturation Model**<sup>8</sup> explains that a person's acculturation type is determined by the person's behaviors toward the American culture and his/her native culture. Berry's model suggests 4 types of acculturation, *Assimilation* (accepting American culture and rejecting native culture), *Integration* (accepting both cultures), *Separation* (accepting native culture and rejecting American culture), and *Marginalization* (rejecting both cultures).

# What Are the Stresses Experienced by Asian International Students?

## 1. PRE-ARRIVAL STRESS

- Obtaining university admission for an Asian international student is more stressful than for a domestic student because of the sheer longer distance, time difference, higher cost, and difficulty in communication.
- Obtaining a student visa (F-1 Visa) can be very stressful. International students need to provide evidence of financial support to the U.S. embassy where the student is scheduled to have an interview for the visa. This interview tends to be very intimidating for international students.
- International students are only allowed one month between the visa issuance and the start of their school. Thus, often times many of these students arrive just a few days before their orientation and first day of school.
- International travel can be stressful, particularly going through US customs.

## 2. POST-ARRIVAL STRESS: ACCULTURATIVE STRESS

Acculturative stress is the stress that a person experiences while adjusting to a new living environment, and Asian international students experience acculturative stress in many aspects of their adjustment to their life in the U.S. Frequently documented acculturative stressors include *language barriers*, *educational stressors*, *sociocultural stressors*, *discrimination*, and *practical stressors*.<sup>9</sup>

- **Language:** A language barrier is a major acculturative stressor for a majority of Asian international students as English is often their second or third language. The anxiety related to speaking English as a second language affects Asian students' communication in general and academic performance in particular. English proficiency (competence in speaking/using English) is more important than English fluency (ability to speak/use good English), and is related to lower acculturative stress.

- **Educational Stressors:** The educational structure and norms with which Asian international students are familiar may be very different from the educational system in the U.S. For example, in many Asian countries, the professor is the authority figure and students are not allowed to challenge them, while the norm in U.S. educational systems may be to be active discussants in class. In addition, many Asian international students are high achieving students, and their academic performance may be below their expectations, which may contribute to increased acculturative stress.
- **Sociocultural Stressors:** Establishing a new social network can be challenging for international students. International students tend to feel lonely and isolated in the beginning months of their stay, and perceive they have less social support than domestic students. Research shows that Asian international students may have more difficulty making friends with locals compared to European international students.
- **Discrimination:** Asian international students report experiencing significant discrimination compared to domestic students or European international students. Experiencing discrimination can impact academic performance negatively and result in poor psychological well-being and depression.
- **Practical Stressors:** A major practical stressor for international students is financial stress. International students have to pay substantially higher tuition fees than domestic students, particularly in the case of public universities. While domestic students often find part-time employment on and off campus, international students' work opportunities are very limited. They can work part-time on campus only with limited choices. In addition, international students are not eligible for any student loan programs.

Acculturative stress can be manifested in a variety of ways<sup>10</sup>:

- Somatic symptoms: fatigue, headaches, increased blood pressure, and gastrointestinal problems
- Psychological symptoms: isolation, helplessness, hopelessness, sadness, feelings of loss, anger, disappointment, sense of inferiority, and clinical depression.

### 3. POST-EDUCATION STRESS

It is common for a college student to experience stress while approaching graduation and while going through the job search process. This phase of professional development can be more stressful for international students than for domestic students because seeking employment in the U.S. or in their home countries can be confusing. In particular, their status as international students vastly limits their opportunity to find employment in the U.S. International students are confronted with a limited window (a few months) to find employment after graduation, and if they cannot secure a job within this time period they are required to leave the country. Even after finding employment in the U.S., they have to go through years of a stressful immigration process if they decide to seek permanent resident status.

If they decide to return to their country, international students will likely experience stress related to their return, or *reverse culture shock*.

## How Can You Support Asian International Students?<sup>11</sup>

1. **Needs Upon Arrival:** Satisfy basic needs (e.g., securing accommodation, food, health care, getting oriented in the campus community as well as the local community)

Recommendations:

- Pick-up services from the airport
- Shuttle services from the campus to the local community
- Temporary housing services on campus/host family programs
- Donation programs
- Advice on legal/immigration and health insurance issues

2. **Needs After Settling In:** They are more concerned about social interaction within and outside of the campus community

Recommendations:

- Provide opportunities for social support and interaction (e.g., mentoring/peer network programs, workshops and support groups to address issues of academic and psychosocial adjustment and discrimination)
- Advertise counseling centers with a focus on stigma reduction and relevant issues for international students

## Providing Appropriate Services for Asian International Students

Asian international students tend to underutilize counseling services. It is vital that students are oriented to the various on- and off-campus offices and resources available and that the services provided are culturally sensitive.

1. Improve the staff and faculty's cultural competence. On-going training regarding multicultural competence needs to be provided.
2. Provide bilingual services.
3. Provide language translation services.
4. Develop outreach materials in Asian languages. (e.g., A flier in the Korean language)
5. Collaborate with other offices, departments, international student organizations, and community ethnic associations. This collaboration can also work on creating a resource package for Asian international students.
6. Create a campus climate that welcomes and values Asian international students and their cultures. (e.g., An international house where international students can socialize. Social events or cultural learning events where domestic and international students can meet each other.)

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