

Mental Health Awareness, Need and Use of Counseling Services for International Students

at Arkansas Tech University

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March 30th, 2016

Abstract

International students face a number of broad challenges while studying abroad. These challenges may cause them some mental health issues which can affect their development and college success. Arkansas Tech University has provided on-campus counseling services to enrolled students for free. The purpose of this research is to assess the mental health awareness, need and use of Counseling Services for international students at Arkansas Tech University. A self-reported, cross-sectional, mix-method survey was designed and conducted among all 406 registered international students in the spring semester of 2016 through an email invitation to participate. 46 completed responses were received, representing a response rate of 11.3%. Half of the responded participants did not know Arkansas Tech University provides free counseling services and they have experienced stress-related problems recently. The top two stress-related problems concerning international students were stress and homesickness. About 85% of them reported their willingness of utilizing the counseling services and it can or may help them with stress-related problems. The biggest concern with using the counseling services is the language barrier; therefore, about 70% of them indicated that having an interpreter may help them become more comfortable with using the counseling services. By presenting this research, we hope to assess the mental health status of international students at Arkansas Tech University, increase the awareness of mental health among international students, and better meet the needs of international students with respect to using the counseling services.

Keywords: International students, mental health, counseling service.

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In the 2014-2015 academic year, about 974,926 international students came to the United States to pursue academic studies and this number indicates a 10.0% increase from the previous academic year's record (IIE, 2015). According to NAFSA International Student Economic Value Tool, Arkansas had 5,918 international students enrolled, and the top three countries of origin are China, Saudi Arabia, and India (NAFSA, 2015). At Arkansas Tech University, there are more than 400 international students representing 38 different countries in 2015.

Although all students encounter some stressful circumstances during college, international students face a number of broad challenges as they transition into a new academic and social environment. There are mainly four specific challenges faced by international students: general living adjustment, academic adjustment marked by an adjustment to the American university system and the skills needed for success, sociocultural adjustment, and personal psychological adjustment (Tseng & Newton, 2002). There is mounting evidence that international students experiencing great stress and psychological problems. Moreover, a number of authors have suggested that within the first six months of study in a foreign country, international students' stress can reach crisis levels (Chalungsooth & Schneller, 2011). Therefore, there is a strong need for greater awareness of international students' mental health status.

With the development of a more matured student affairs division, the functional area of international student programs and services has also started to offer a more comprehensive and effective service to international students with an increasing collaboration of many different functional areas. As a result, it is definitely significant to include mental health wellness as one

of the outcomes of programs and services in order to ensure the safety and success of international students while studying in American colleges and universities. When problems arise, international students typically process it by themselves first, and then approach friends, family, or professors. For severe or complex problems, it is necessary for international students to seek professional counseling services early on. However, the utilization rate of counseling services by international students continue to be low despite the growth of their population and the development of such services (Chen & Lewis, 2011; Mori, 2000; Nilsson, Berkel, Flores & Lukas, 2004).

The purpose of this study is to assess the mental health awareness, need and use of counseling services of international students at Arkansas Tech University. Arkansas Tech University Counseling Services is located in the Health and Wellness Center on campus and it provides different formats of free professional counseling services to enrolled students. Each currently enrolled student may receive ten sessions per academic year for free. By conducting a survey among all enrolled international students at Arkansas Tech University in the spring semester of 2016, this research obtained data on the demographics of participants, their awareness and need for counseling services, use and satisfaction with counseling services, and factors that make them more or less concerned with utilizing counseling services. Besides obtaining the information above, other objectives of this research include increasing awareness of the mental health status of international students amongst the university faculty and staff members in hopes of improving practices and programming connected with promoting and offering effective counseling services to international students.

Methods

To assess the mental health awareness, need and use of counseling services of international students at Arkansas Tech University, a self-reported, cross-sectional, mix-method survey research was designed and conducted. The university's Institutional Review Board approved the use of human subjects in this research. All 406 current international students for the spring semester of 2016 were invited to participate in the online survey with one reminder email and a three-week-long period of time to complete the survey. A total of 46 completed responses were received by the survey expiration date, representing an 11.3% response rate.

The survey instrument included the questions in the following categories: Demographics, Awareness & Need, Use & Satisfaction, and Factors. Demographic information obtained include basic information such as classification, the length of studying at Arkansas Tech University, age range, and gender. In awareness and need, the survey focused on awareness of counseling services and self-perceived mental health status, and whether participants think the counseling services help with his or her mental issues. In use and satisfaction, the survey focused on participant willingness and satisfaction with utilizing the counseling services. In the factors category, participants were able to indicate all their concerns with using the counseling services and whether they will be more comfortable using the counseling services if provided with an interpreter.

To analyze the result, we coded responses for most closed-ended questions dichotomously. And other responses were represented in a table format. We paid particular attention to not using the term of mental health in the survey so that participants would not be over sensitive or afraid of the topic due to personal or cultural understanding. The survey was

anonymous and gave participants the option not to disclose any information if they did not want to. We also ended our survey with an open-ended question that allowed participants to offer any other thought as a comment or suggestion. To eliminate other potential problems associated with low response rate, we also reminded participants of the confidential nature of the survey in the introductory email as well as at the beginning of the survey. This survey was designed specifically for international students studying at Arkansas Tech University, but the survey structure and most survey questions are also valid for other institutions that offer on-campus counseling services.

Results

Respondent Characteristics

Table 1 presents data on the characteristics of the respondents. A greater proportion of respondents (37.0%) were international students who study at the English Language Institute (ELI). In addition, a great proportion of respondents (69.5%) have studied at Arkansas Tech University for less than a year. Most of the respondents (60.9%) were traditional students who are younger than 24 years. Although 65.2% of respondents responded as females, this figure cannot be used to determine if there was a significant difference between the gender ratios because the participants were not all required to disclose their gender. The top two countries of most respondents were China (34.8%) and Saudi Arabia (33.3%), which are also the two main countries of ELI students.

Awareness and Need

Data on the awareness of available counseling services and self-perception of any mental health problems were obtained and presented in Table 2. Half of the respondents reported that they did not know Arkansas Tech University offers free counseling services prior this survey.

For the other half of the respondents who knew about the availability of counseling services, 30% reported knowing about it from the International and Multicultural Student Services Office (IMSSO). It is worthy of note that all international students are required to attend the mandatory new international student orientation, where the counseling service offered by the Health and Wellness Center is typically introduced. 50% of respondents reported having recently experienced stress-related problems. The top three reported mental health problems included: stress (18.7%), homesickness (16.5%), and relationships (12.4%). Other minor problems also included loneliness, financial concerns, academic concerns, anxiety, cultural shock, and depression. When asked about their perception of the potential usefulness of counseling services for their stress-related problems, 8.7% of respondents confirmed and 76.1% of them believe, to a certain degree, that the counseling services would be helpful.

Use and Satisfaction

As illustrated in Table 3, although 82.6% of respondents had never used counseling services before, 84.8% of respondents reported an absolute or some willingness to utilize counseling services if undergoing any stress-related problems. Interestingly, 10.9% of respondents reported they would not be willing to seek counseling services when they experience any mental health issues. The reason for this unwillingness or factors that may cause any concerns with utilizing counseling services was asked, and results from responses presented in the next section.

Factors

Table 4 displays the result of participants' response to questions about their concerns with using the counseling service. A considerable number of respondents (29.7%) reported language barrier as a major concern with utilizing the counseling service. This was closely

followed by concerns from their cultural background (18.8%). Additional concerns included time (12.2%), confidentiality and social shame (10.9%), religious differences (7.8%) and other concerns (4.7%). Furthermore, 17% of participants indicated that they would be willing to use the counseling service if provided with a translator or an interpreter while 52.2% indicated that they might consider doing that as well. In responding to the open-ended prompt on other concerns with utilizing the counseling services, participants made comments which revolved around issues with privacy versus the provision of an interpreter, cultural perceptions of counseling, as well as the limited awareness, scope and mode of counseling services.

Discussion

This research was designed and conducted to assess the mental health awareness, need and use of Counseling Services for international students at Arkansas Tech University. There were several notable findings which possess different implications for practices supporting the development and success of international students in higher education institutions with specific regards to Arkansas Tech University.

Firstly, only half of respondents were aware of the counseling services available on campus. For this hall, only 30% indicated that their main way of knowing was through the International and Multicultural Student Services Offices (IMSSO). This draws attention to some of the responses that were given by participants;

Sometimes it is necessary to get some counseling related to our exams anxiety and depression related to our life/exams/jobs. Students should be provided more opportunities and encouraged to receive those service. Even we know about counseling services, but only few attend those” (Survey, March 2016).

Comments such as the above, and others like “I hope the Counseling Services can host some fun events rather than workshops to help students reduce stress and maintain a better mental health status” (Survey, March 2016), shed light on the methods and modes of delivery of information regarding the availability counseling services for international students at Arkansas Tech University. More innovative and diverse approaches can be developed and utilized to better promote the knowledge of counseling services among international students, which should not be restricted to one-time events or only during certain times such as orientation days. It is necessary to ensure the awareness of counseling services so that international students can seek professional assistance with their mental concerns on time.

In addition, half of the respondents reported having experienced mental health related problems in stress (18.7%), homesickness (16.5%), relationships (12.4%), and others. This result should raise attention among faculty, staff and other related personnel to pay more attention with international student mental health. An implication for International and Multicultural Student Services Office, Counseling Services or other student affairs department is to provide and promote programs and services that include outcomes focusing on student issues with stress, homesickness, and relationships concerns.

Although international students at Arkansas Tech University reported having experienced mental health related concerns that could benefit from the utilization of counseling services, only 19.6% of respondents reported willingness of utilizing counseling services while the majority (65.2%) remained uncertain. Findings from this study indicated that English language proficiency continues to pose a major hindrance to their use of counseling services. And the provision of interpreters appeared to be a desirable element in promoting the use of counseling services for this population of students. Nonetheless, the provision of interpreters raises other

concerns bordering around the preservation of privacy and confidentiality of information shared with the counselor, interpreter and the student. This classical dilemma may provide a partial explanation for the high rate of neutral responses (52.2%) with the respect to the provision of an interpreter during a counseling session. This viewpoint is perhaps made more lucid by participant comments such as:

If the university provided a translator I will be more unlikely to attend. I would feel uncomfortable that there is a third party setting in the room with us. The interpreter can help with the language barrier, but that means more people knows my things even if they have signed the confidential contract (Survey, March 2016).

In other words, it is necessary to devise strategies for making international students feel more comfortable with sharing their mental health concerns with the counselor, even in the presence of an interpreter, and have confidence in their multicultural and professional competency. This report would be delivered to the counseling services for a meaningful implementation of the research findings. In addition, it will also be meaningful to equip faculty and student affairs staff members with basic college student counseling and multicultural competency skills in order to effectively support the increasingly diverse scope of the international student population.

Moreover, the international and multiple cultural student services office can collaborate with the counseling services center in developing informational materials in different languages to promote the awareness of mental health and the utilization of counseling services. These translated materials can be strategically provided to international students in different settings, such as the international student orientation, English Language Institute instructor offices, counseling services, and other student affairs departments.

Furthermore, it may be necessary to also focus the attention of international students support services towards developing outcomes that aim to desensitize or deconstruct some of the negative preconceived notions about the need for and use of counseling services which international students hold as a result of their cultural backgrounds. This suggestion becomes more meaningful in consideration of results from this study which reveals that a large number of respondents (91.3%) are in the negative or unclear about the usefulness of utilizing counseling services in handling their mental health concerns. Indeed, some of the respondents' comments provide some clues as to the reason for these results, "it's not in our culture to use counseling services, there are social implications attached. We talk with family, friends and share our concerns. Technology has made it so easy to reach anyone you feel like sharing with" (Survey, March 2016). Attitude determines everything and the negative perception of international students towards the use of counseling services becloud whatever knowledge they may possess towards seeking help when the need arises.

In conclusion, international students, like every other student sub-population, can inform some of the undesirable outcomes in higher education such as low student retention and graduation rates. And a crucial aspect of mitigating against these is by ensuring the all-round, including mental health, wellness of international students. For this reason, it is hoped that findings from this research will prove beneficial in informing the consolidation of efforts to promote the mental health wellness of all international students.

Limitations

One major limitation of the research is the language barrier. The content of the survey and introductory email were both in English, which might have created some difficulties for international students who have less proficient in English. This may also be one of the reasons

for the low response rate. The ELI instructors reported that students who are in lower levels of ELI had trouble completing the survey as they could not fully understand the questions.

Another limiting factor in this study is the poor representation of international students. As stated earlier, most participants were ELI students (37.0%), freshmen (28.3%), and graduate student (21.8%). Upper-level undergraduate international students were missing in data collection, perhaps due their busy schedule. As a result, information obtained from participants do not fully represent that of the international student population at Arkansas Tech University.

Suggestions

In our research, we did not obtain the perspective of the counseling service staff who might offer some meaningful insight to the research. It will be useful to know the challenges that counselors may possess with a diverse group such as the international students population. In our research, we did not obtain the perspective from Counseling Service staff who can also offer some meaningful input for the research. It will be useful to know the challenges that counselors may possess with diversity population.

For future research, we recommend that further study employs multiple approaches to collecting and analyzing data related to the aim of this study. As mentioned above, it is challenging for international students who are not fluent in English to complete the English version of the survey. Translating the survey to their native languages may encourage a better response rate. Researchers also could collect data from faculty, staff and counselors who possess multiple perspectives on the topic of this research. We mainly focused our attention on the perception of international students about using the counseling service; but by looking at other perspectives, researchers could have a different understanding of the factors influencing the utilization of counseling services by international students. Furthermore, additional statistical

analysis of the information obtained from this study could, in a variety of ways, provide more in-depth understanding of the interaction of other variables which this study did not address. Such interactions include but are not limited to age, gender, and years of study of international students who participated in this study.

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Appendixes

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents n=46

<u>Classification</u>	
ELI student	37.0%
Freshmen	28.3%
Sophomore	4.3%
Junior	4.3%
Senior	4.3%
Graduate student	21.8%
<u>Length of Study (y)</u>	
<1	69.5%
1	10.9%
2	8.7%
3	0.0%
4	6.5%
5	2.2%
>5	2.2%
<u>Age Range</u>	
18-20	37.0%
21-23	23.9%
24-26	23.9%
>27	15.2%
<u>Gender</u>	
Man	32.6%
Female	65.2%
Transgender	0.0%
Not to disclose	2.2%
<u>Nationality</u>	
China	34.8%
Saudi Arabia	33.3%
Nigeria	7.6%
Nepal	4.5%
India	3.0%
Other*	16.8%

*Other countries include Côte d'Ivoire, Denmark, Dominica, Japan, Kuwait, Nepal, South Korea, Tanzania, and four not to indicate.

Table 2

*Awareness of Counseling Services and Mental Health Statuses n = 46*Awareness of Counseling Services

Yes	50.0%
No	50.0%

Methods of Knowing

Friend	26.7%
Instructor	16.6%
IMSSO	30.0%
Website	26.7%

Awareness of Mental Problems

Yes	50.0%
No	41.3%
N/A	8.7%

Stress-related Problems

Stress	18.7%
Homesickness	16.5%
Relationships	12.4%
Loneliness	11.3%
Financial concerns	11.3%
Academic concerns	11.3%
Anxiety	7.2%
Cultural shock	4.1%
Depression	3.1%
Other	4.1%

Usefulness of Counseling Services

Yes	8.7%
Maybe	76.1%
No	10.9%
N/A	4.3%

Table 3

*Willingness and Satisfaction of Utilizing Counseling Services n = 46*Willingness of Utilization

Yes	19.6%
Maybe	65.2%
No	10.9%
N/A	4.3%

Satisfaction of Services

Yes	6.5%
Somehow	10.9%
No	0.0%
Never used	82.6%

Table 4

*Factors Affecting the Use of Counseling Services n = 46*Concerns with Utilization

Language barrier	29.7%
Cultural background	18.8%
Time	17.2%
Confidentiality	10.9%
Social shame	10.9%
Religious difference	7.8%
Other	4.7%

Preference of Interpreter

Yes	17.4%
Maybe	52.2%
No	13.0%
N/A	17.4%