Chapter 11

Pre-Departure Cultural Preparation for International Students: Addressing Adjustment Needs before Study Abroad

Tara Madden-Dent
HLSL Institute, USA

Rita M. Laden
University of Nevada – Reno, USA

ABSTRACT

As international students continue influencing U.S. higher educational systems, greater attention is placed on innovative cross-cultural curriculum as well as international student recruitment and retention policies. To contribute research-based implications for practice, the authors introduce findings from a phenomenological study which examined pre-departure and post-arrival experiences of eastern Asian undergraduate international students who either completed a pre-departure cultural preparation treatment or received the university’s standard international student services at a western U.S. research university. This study contributes a new understanding of one pre-departure online cultural preparation treatment that increased cultural knowledge and cross-cultural coping in addition to eastern Asian students’ recommendations for U.S. higher education to improve international education’s pre-departure and post-arrival processes.

INTRODUCTION

The U.S. remains a top study abroad destination for international students and has demonstrated consecutive increases in its annual international student enrollment rates over the past several years (IIE, 2014). As international students continue to play important roles in campus diversification (Sahin, 2008; Ward, 2001) and contribute billions of dollars to the U.S. economy (IIE, 2011; Lyman & Rogers, 1994;
NAFSA, 2013), U.S. higher educational institutions will continually evolve recruitment strategies, cultural competence curriculum, and retention services to address the unique cross-cultural needs of this valued student demographic.

Attending to cross-cultural issues during U.S. study experiences, some institutions have provided pre-departure cultural training and transition support programs to aid post-arrival adjustment. These strategies have found to increase cultural knowledge and coping skills (Madden-Dent, 2014; Pitts, 2009; Sanchez, Spector, & Cooper, 2000; Shim & Paprock, 2002), but most literature focuses on post-arrival cultural training treatments compared to pre-departure treatments and the influence on post-arrival cultural and academic adjustment.

The authors in this chapter introduce the research findings from a phenomenological study which examined both pre-departure and post-arrival experiences of international undergraduate students from China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, who either completed a pre-departure cultural preparation treatment or received the university’s standard international student services at a western U.S. research university. The findings help illuminate pre-departure preparation influences on post-arrival transition and first semester adjustment to U.S. academic systems and culture as well as issues related to communication, socialization, safety, health, and student engagement.

This chapter is organized to achieve two objectives. The first objective is to provide a new understanding of one pre-departure online cultural preparation treatment and how it contributed to the participants’ increased cultural knowledge and cross-cultural coping skills. The second objective is to provide eastern Asian student recommendations for U.S. higher educational systems to improve cross-cultural student services during pre-departure and post-arrival adjustment phases. This chapter will conclude with a discussion of implications for practice and future research directions.

**Review of the Literature**

In 2014 the U.S. hosted more than 886,000 international students which is a 56.8% increase since 2004/2005 (IIE, 2014). This influx in multinational demographics has enriched the U.S. higher educational system through diversification, but the matrix of intercultural interactions has also created a need for student services that prepare and support international students for cross-cultural adjustment. One way to address this need is to better understand the unique phenomenon that occurs during pre-departure and post-arrival adjustment stages and how cultural education can help international students manage acculturation stressors.

Compared to domestic students, international students are prone to experiencing a series of acculturation challenges and distress while adjusting to local laws and policies, academic systems, communication styles, social etiquette, foreign cuisine, healthcare, transportation, weather and environmental variables (Berry, 2006; Leong, Mallinckrodt, & Kralj, 1990; Mori, 2000). The myriad of cross-cultural challenges during study abroad can negatively impact international students’ academics (Weng, Cheong, & Cheong, 2010), sociocultural adjustment (Ward & Kennedy, 1994), health and psychological well-being, (Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994; Tochkov, Levine, & Sanaka, 2010; Yoon, Lee, & Goh, 2008), communication (Shah, 1991), and persistence (Gardner, 2007). Weng, Cheong, and Cheong (2010) stated that, “Poor academic performance is often indicative of difficulties in adjusting to university environment and makes dropout more likely” (p. 337).
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