

Supporting International Students From Countries Dealing with Trauma

WHEN TRAUMATIC EVENTS OCCUR in the home countries of their international students, international student advisers on U.S. campuses spring into action. While there is nothing they can do about the events abroad—political upheavals, natural disasters, wars, and other tragedies—there is a lot they can do to ease the anxieties of students far from their homes. These international students are in need of advisers' support because they might be unable to reach their families and may quickly face the stresses of health, financial, and legal issues.

With students from countries including war-torn Iraq, revolutionary Egypt, and hurricane-stricken Haiti, advisers must deal with issues and needs different from those of the average students from abroad. "You would think they would have the same issues as other internationals, but as you probe more, you realize these students have to be looked upon as special in many ways," says Rodolfo R. Altamirano, director of International Student and Scholar Services at the University of Pennsylvania.

"They will bring stressful social and cultural baggage with them and will face tougher challenges in adjusting to the university. We encounter a lot of this," says Altamirano. With more than 4,000 international students, Penn has worked with students from China and Chile as well as Haiti, countries all traumatized by earthquakes, and others whose homes were in the path of tsunamis in Indonesia, Altamirano reports.

"It's very different from being an adviser of international students who can go back to their home countries with no problems. Students from countries that have been through trauma don't have the ability to resolve their issues by going home, so trying to help those students creates a different scenario," declares Adria L. Baker, executive director of the Office of International Students and Scholars at Rice University.

Students from trauma countries "add an extra layer of complexity" to the challenges international student advisers normally face, states Mark Hallett, director of

International Student and Scholar Services in the Office of International Programs at Colorado State University.

He cites Hanaa Thigeel, a native of Iraq, who had been married four days in 2004 when the car in which she and her husband were riding on their honeymoon hit an improvised explosive device that killed her husband and severely injured her, causing her to become a paraplegic. Through a series of developments, Thigeel was brought to the United States for treatment with the support of CSU and a local Colorado Rotary Club. A veterinarian, she enrolled at CSU in 2006, intending to pursue a graduate degree in animal science.

"Mark gave me a great opportunity to work and study at the same time. He didn't mind that I was disabled and knew little English," says Thigeel, who now is pursuing a PhD at CSU. Among other things, Hallett helped her obtain a visa, advocated for her admission to the university, got her into an English as a Second Language program, linked her to CSU's Office of Resources for Disabled Students, located a host family and local mentor for her, gave her a part-time work-study job in his office, and asked his staff to befriend her, although, he says, "they would have figured that out themselves."

"International offices do this sort of thing behind the scenes all the time, but there are some cases that require extra effort," Hallett declares. When she earns her doctorate, says Thigeel, "I would like to get a job, get my citizenship in the U.S., and stay here."



to our students and after this disaster it really showed itself,” adds Michelle Lindell, international recruitment specialist at the college, which has enrolled Haitian students for about 20 years.

Among internal supports, the college’s counseling staff provided group and individual counseling to the students. Externally, local families that the college enlists to host and mentor all foreign students during their first year at NTC “really stood by their sides,” providing meals to the students, going with them to ecumenical worship services, and otherwise “being friends,” says Lindell.

There also was “a great outpouring” of financial assistance, she continues. “Without a lot of effort,” the college raised about \$10,000 from the local community, which it sent to the Haitian students’ families to assist them with recovery and rebuilding, Lindell reports.

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“Emotionally, we got some help from everybody at the college, especially the people in the international office,” says Erode Laborde, one of the Haitian students. He says his host family “stayed with me all the time to give me support. They prayed with me, talked to me, and every time they went to the store, they bought a phone card for me so I could try to call my family. They didn’t leave me alone, so that I wouldn’t be lonely and thinking about what was happening in Haiti,” Laborde says.

“Because we are a small college in a relatively small community, we are very individually attuned to our students. We have students from other countries who experience issues like depression, but none of the Haitian students was clinically at that


Providing Support After a Disaster

When a massive earthquake devastated much of Haiti last year, its effects were felt far from the Caribbean nation. In Wausau, Wisconsin, where several students from Haiti were enrolled at Northcentral Technical College (NTC) when the earthquake struck, the disaster triggered an intervention and support system that the college coordinated with the local community.

Bonnie Bissonette, associate dean of Business and International Education at NTC, says the Haitian students felt “a pervasive sense of guilt” after the earthquake, “being here and knowing that their families and friends and communities were suffering in such a big way.” NTC set out to combat those feelings and “steer them in a positive direction,” she says.

“We have a great network here, both internally and externally, that we can provide

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point because we and the community tried to steer them into activities that kept their minds off what was happening at home. We didn't let them just sit and watch the news on TV," says Bissonette.

Risk of Depression

Depression is an issue that frequently develops with students from trauma-stricken countries. Baker cites a Rice student from Iraq who became depressed by what was happening in his country. "Dealing with this type of depression is different from helping a student who becomes stressed out because of school pressures. Sometimes those students can go home for a respite and whatever medical treatment a doctor prescribes. But this student from Iraq couldn't do that," Baker says. Her office helped him get appropriate medical treatment and "he is doing much better now," she reports.

"You have to work through each issue step by step," says Baker. For foreign students with problems, she usually pulls together an ad hoc working group of the "proper people," who could include a dean, religious and counseling center specialists, and, for undergraduate students, their residential masters.

"You have to structure your initiatives, outreach, programmatic functions, so that you can easily intervene or reach out," agrees Altamirano, who says he decided to be "very proactive" when he arrived at Penn four years ago. He created the "three I's"—an International Student Advisory Board, International Partners Outreach Group, and Intercultural Leadership Program. Composed of international students and administrators representing all of the principal support services that the university provides, the groups work together to address the needs of all of Penn's more than 4,000 international students.

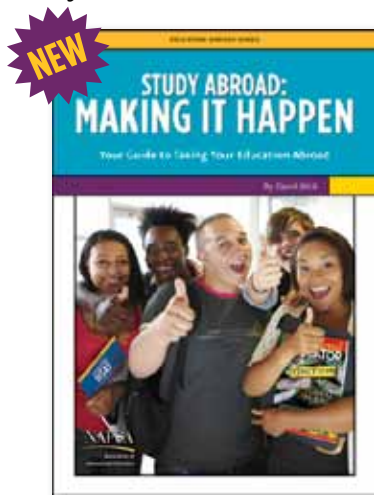
"If there is a crisis in a foreign country, we are all on the same page. We are able to communicate with each other and identify who should be involved and how," Altamirano says.

At Colorado State, an "emergency consult team" coordinated through the Student Affairs Division addresses individual students' issues, and Hallett joins the team if an international student is involved. "That kind of campus network is vital," he says.

NAFSA Publication

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Economic Hardship Can Occur

Often a change in their financial circumstances is a significant issue for students from countries suffering from trauma, says Elaine Kimbrell, an attorney at David Ware & Associates in Los Angeles.

"Students may have come from well-off families, and suddenly their families are struggling at home to make ends meet, so the students may no longer be able to afford the school they are attending or their housing," Kimbrell says.

"When a student is here and things change at home, it's one of the toughest quandaries for international student advisers," agrees Hallett. Financial hardships and a need to pursue some kind of legal or regulatory solution to their situations often go hand-in-hand, he says.

To maintain their immigration status, he explains, international students must remain enrolled and maintain a certain number of credits. If their families no longer can pay the tuition, he says, "it's a matter of figuring, can an institution be a little forgiving and allow a student to register and carry a higher debt load? At what point is that counter-productive if you are harming students by letting them dig themselves too big a hole? Are scholarships available? It's a really tough situation."

A possible solution, Kimbrell suggests, is to help needy international students gain an emergency employment authorization document (EAD) based on "severe economic hardship caused by unforeseen circumstances beyond the student's control."

Sometimes, International Students Can't Go Home

International students who fear returning home or are unable to return because of changed political conditions face other issues. Applying for political asylum in the United States is one possible solution. "They may not even know of that route, but if they do that, it has to be done in a confidential manner to protect their family back home," Hallett says. Campus advisers can help by finding "somebody who can work with them pro bono," he says, possibly at a nearby law school or through local chapters of the American Immigration Lawyers Association.

"It's critical for us in an international student advising office to realize where our expertise ends, and be aware of other resources where we can refer these students that competently provide the services they need," Hallett says.

"Being able to refer them to an attorney or a charitable organization that deals with refugees and asylees is probably the most important thing a school official can do to help these students," agrees Kimbrell.

"Sometimes it takes time, trying over and over with different agencies that are used to dealing with people in a lot of difficult situations," says Baker, who suggests nonprofits and religious organizations among possible resources. "You have to really dig," she asserts.

With 1,100 international students, about 20 percent of its population, Rice is sensitive to their needs, Baker says. But a question for foreign student advisers, she says, is "should we watch them closely when they arrive or wait for a problem to develop?" Each student's situation is different, she says, and "sometimes you only find out about it when they come to talk to you about something else."

"We are very sensitive to countries that we know have had trauma, and we try to be up-front about it with students from those countries, letting them know at the beginning that we are here to help them. We tell them we have an open-door policy, that we are a place where they can ask questions and get help. I think that whether or not they have special needs, students are happy to know that somebody really cares about them and that they could come to you if they felt they needed to," Baker says.

Because of privacy issues, she says, she struggles with how deeply to intrude into a student's concerns, but "when in doubt, don't hesitate to intrude," she advises. "Sometimes even if you can't resolve the situation, it helps the student just to know that somebody will listen to them and they can ask their questions over and over. That helps tremendously even if the situation cannot be resolved," Baker concludes. **IE**

ALAN DESSOFF is an independent journalist in Bethesda, Maryland. His last article for *IE* was "Higher Education Partners with the United Nations" in the November/December 2010 issue.



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