

## The Counseling Supervision Needs of International Students in U.S. Institutions of Higher Education: A Culturally-Sensitive Supervision Model for Counselor Educators

**Laura M. Reid**

*Purdue University*

**Andrea L. Dixon**

*Georgia State University*

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*With the ever-increasing number of international students attending universities in the United States (U.S.), there are a growing number of international students in counseling preparation programs. This article provides an overview of the literature on unique counseling supervision needs of international students training to become counselors. Based on the literature, the authors offer a culturally-sensitive supervision model for counselors and supervisors providing practicum and internship supervision to international students at U.S. higher education institutions.*

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**C**urrent research and statistics from the Institute of International Education (IIE) indicate that over the next century the population of the United States (U.S.) will become increasingly ethnically diverse (IIE, 2009; Sue & Sue, 2007). As a result, student populations within U.S. higher education institutions continue to move from racially homogenous to more heterogeneous demographics (Sue & Sue, 2007). Tidwell and Hanassab (2007) reported that the numbers of international students enrolled at U.S. universities are growing. According to the IIE *Open Doors* in 2009, there were over 670,000 international students enrolled at colleges and universities in the U.S. - a more than 40,000 increase from the previous year (Open Doors Report, 2009). This demographic transformation is also becoming evident in graduate-level counseling programs in the U.S. (Ng, 2006), indicating that it is becoming increasingly more important for counseling programs to maintain diverse training and supervision models that can be utilized with international counseling students.

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Counseling preparation programs currently represent numerous minority groups, including greater numbers of international students from around the world training to become counselors in the U.S. or back in their home countries (Clawson, Henderson, Schweiger, & Collins, 2004; Ng, 2006). As a reflection of this trend, the multicultural and cross-cultural counselor training issues of culturally diverse students have received much attention in the field of counselor education (Gainor & Constantine, 2002; Gardener, 2002; Toporek, Ortega-Villalobos, & Pope-Davis, 2004). However, counselor educators supervising international students is a training interaction that remains neglected for the most part in the research (Ng, 2006; Nilsson & Wang, 2008). Most recently, Nilsson and Wang (2008) discussed in their book chapter, some of the needs of international counseling and psychology students have and gave recommendations to those supervising these students. The purpose of this article is to extend on their chapter by providing an overview of the literature regarding the cultural experiences of international students in U.S. universities training to become counselors and their potentially unique counseling supervision needs. Based on the literature, we then present a model of supervision for counseling supervisors in the U.S. providing practicum and internship supervision to international students.

### **The Needs of International Students**

A growing problem facing universities in the U.S. is addressing the unique and common concerns that international individuals in the U.S. face (Jacob & Greggo, 2001). International students encounter many distinctive challenges in adjusting to novel academic surroundings, and these changes may influence the students' academic achievement and psychological well-being, as well as educational institutions' efficiency in retaining these students on their campuses (Barratt & Huba, 1994; Pedersen, 1991; Zhai, 2002). For instance, current researchers report that international students experience psychological disturbance to the same degree or higher than students who belong to the dominant U.S. culture (Dao, Donghyuck, & Chang, 2007). Common problems that international students often confront on a daily basis include: language barriers, cultural differences and racial discrimination, social interaction and personal adjustment difficulties (Abe, Talbot & Geelhoed, 1998; Luzzo, Henao, & Wilson, 1996).

### **Struggles with Language**

Many international students do not speak English fluently, and as a result suffer in classrooms that are English-speaking only (Poyrazli & Graham, 2007). Statistics from the IIE (2009) show that the majority of international students studying in the U.S. are from Asian, non-English speaking countries. International students might thus be heavily affected by an inability to communicate effectively with faculty, and classmates (Zhai, 2002), and this issue can impact their transition to their new home. Dao et al. (2007) conducted research with a sample of 121 Asian international students and found that perceived English fluency and perceived social support level played a significant effect on these students' level of depression.

Other indirect factors might impact international students negatively. For example, international students may not be accustomed to the manner in which U.S.-trained faculty present information and how classrooms are organized (Pandit, 2007). As a result, international students may fail courses, which can lead to significant stress affecting not only their academic performance, but also their social performance (Chen, 1992; Zhai, 2002). However, to their credit, most universities work to accommodate non-English speaking students. Many graduate programs, including graduate counseling programs attempt to address this issue in the admissions screening process. Students are required to take the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) to assess their English proficiency and there is a minimum score that students must achieve to be eligible for many Educational programs. However, many international students still struggle with English despite having this required level of proficiency. We believe that although one may understand English in a more formal context, understanding casual English conversation and slang terminologies remains difficult for non-native English speakers. In addition, it is critical to consider that it is highly unlikely that counselor education programs can accommodate all non-English speaking students equally because the students may represent a wide variety of languages and cultures.

### **Differences in Culture and Racism**

It is common for international students to find some of their values mismatched with values of the host culture given the diverse cultures from which they come (Lieberman, 1994; Robinson-Pant, 2009). As a result of coming to contact with a new culture international students experience a process known as acculturation. The acculturation process involves community and individual changes that occur when two different cultures interact (Berry, 1997). As a result of acculturation international students may face several barriers. A study by Poyrazli and Graham (2007) revealed that international students experienced numerous barriers that hindered their participation in their social and academic communities. For example, Asian students' criticism of the casualness of American classrooms (Lieberman, 1994) may suggest some very fundamental differences in the philosophy of education and interpersonal relationships. In Asian cultures, instructional organization follows a professor-providing and student-receiving model, and there is a set of firm classroom rules for students to obey (Chen, 1999). Consequently, Asian students may feel very puzzled and confused when they face recurrent classroom discussions and student presentations leading to a feeling of loneliness.

In a qualitative study, McLachlan and Justin (2009) found that 95% of international student reported deep feelings of homesickness and loneliness. We suggest that students from the U.S. might have a different experience than international students given that U.S. born students might be from another area in the U.S., but they are familiar with the culture. Furthermore, even doctoral students face adjustment issues when they are called upon to do research within a culture in which they are unfamiliar (Robinson-Pant, 2009).

Pedersen (1995) found that racism is still highly visible in social institutions such as universities. For example, in 2007, at Teacher's College, a noose was hung from the doorknob of a Black professor's door; An incident showing clear racism against African

Americans (New York Times, 2007). Unfortunately, numerous incidents such as the one at Teacher's College occur annually. Many international students are surprised by the racial discrimination they face in the U.S. because they are accustomed to being members of the majority population in their home countries (Yoon & Portman, 2004). Racial prejudice may disrupt the acculturation process of international students and "can result in internalized or externalized anger, helplessness, prejudice toward the mainstream cultural group, and other forms of unresolved practical and emotional issues" (Westwood & Ishiyama, 1991, p. 134).

## **Social Interactions**

International students face other practical and emotional issues. With limited social support, it is not surprising that international student populations often report personal as well as mental concerns (Yeh & Inose, 2003). International students face challenges coping with the loss of comfortable social support systems in their home countries, and with developing new social support systems in the U.S. (Poyrazli & Graham, 2007). Values might play a huge role in facilitating the development of relationships with U.S. born peers. Many international students originate from collectivist countries that contrast with the individualistic value system of the U.S., making it difficult for international students to find people with similar value systems. The individualism-collectivism cultural experience is defined as "the degree to which a culture encourages, fosters, and facilitates the needs, wishes, desires, and values of an autonomous and unique self over those of a group" (Matsumoto, 2007, p. 41). Hofstede (1983) defined individualistic cultures as those whose members primarily exhibit independence from groups, organizations, or other collectives. The U.S. has long been regarded as a highly individualistic society in comparison with other societies (Hofstede, 1983; Triandis, Brislin, & Hui, 1988; Triandis, McCusker, & Hui, 1990). Ady (1998) defined cultural collectivism as "Individual people holding their goals as second to those of a group of people to which they belong" (p. 112). This cultural quality can be found more often in Asia, South America, and the Pacific Islands (Triandis et al., 1988).

While students from individualistic cultures may identify with the U.S. mainstream culture, those from collectivist cultures may feel very different and isolated (Swagler & Ellis, 2003). For instance, unlike their American peers, international students do not have familiar resources in the U.S. that they have in their home countries to aid them in combating varying stressors such as social isolation and academic pressures. Thus, it is critical for universities and educators to address international students' needs and the barriers they have to academic and personal success while studying in the U.S. Because counseling and counselor education programs have a successful history of adapting to the needs of the diverse students they train, counselor educators and counseling programs are encouraged to learn more about the needs of their increasing numbers of international students.

## International Students in Counseling Programs

Counseling programs have a history for adapting and changing to fit the needs of their students since their inception. In September of 1981, the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) granted accreditation to 44 counseling programs at 16 institutions of higher education. Since that time, more than 100 programs in more than 70 institutions have been granted accreditation through CACREP (2009). Additionally, there are many counseling programs not included in these numbers who are training international students to become counselors. With the increasing number of counseling programs and counselor educators' emphases on training diverse and culturally-responsive counselors to work with the U.S. and world diverse populations, counselor training programs also have increasing numbers of international students training to become counselors.

Current statistics indicate that international students are enrolled in nearly 50 percent of counselor training programs accredited by the CACREP (CACREP, 2009; Ng, 2006). They are also enrolled in counselor preparation programs in all five U.S. geographic locations (Western, Southern, North Atlantic, Northern Central, and Rocky Mountains). Research by Ng (2006) regarding counselor education programs revealed that international students were found in 70 master's level programs, four specialist's level programs, and 24 doctoral programs. Thus, international students are enrolled in 53 percent of counseling doctoral programs indicating that both master's and doctoral programs in the U.S. are training students from around the world (Atkinson, 1983; Atkinson, Brown, Casas, & Zane, 1996; Ng, 2006; Ponterotto, Alexander, & Grieger, 1995).

International students are highly important given that some will return home upon graduating and assist in expanding the counseling profession worldwide. Consequently, with the growing numbers of international counseling students, counseling programs and counselor educators are faced with the challenge of better understanding the specialized training and unique supervision needs of these students. Literature indicates that counselor educators' and supervisors' understanding of and research regarding students' counseling supervision needs have focused on American racial/ethnic minorities and have for the most part neglected international students who come to the U.S. for their graduate education in counseling (Dao et al., 2007; Ng, 2006). For example, Mori (2000) reported that international students on U.S. college campuses are a diverse and increasing population whose unique concerns traditionally are disregarded. The same reality appears to be true in professional counseling and counselor education.

### Cross-Cultural Supervision in Counseling

Bernard and Goodyear (2009) defined supervision as an evaluative relationship between a counselor in training and a senior member of the counseling profession in which the supervisor's purpose is to "enhance the professional functioning of the supervisee" (p. 4). Cross-cultural supervision has been defined as a supervisor-supervisee relationship in which there are cultural differences based on race and ethnicity (Fukuyama, 1994). Scant research has been done on cross-cultural supervision as it relates to students from other

countries. Despite that, it is likely that the supervision triad of client, counselor, and supervisor will most likely include persons of varying racial/ethnic backgrounds who are faced with concerns in differing social environments (Gardener, 2002).

Research and literature on cross-cultural counseling issues in professional counseling and counselor education has a significant history (Christensen, 1984; D'Andrea & Daniels, 1991; D'Andrea, Daniels, & Heck, 1991; Estrada, Frame & Williams, 2004). Thanks to recent research substantiating the diverse background of counselors in training, there is a significant focus on the training and preparation of counselors from diverse backgrounds training to serve students representing international populations (Estrada et al., 2004). To increase the efficacy of this focus, CACREP (2009) emphasizes the need for counselors and counselor educators to practice multicultural counseling competencies.

The Multicultural Counseling Competencies and Standards (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992) emphasize the development of counselor competency along the dimensions of awareness, knowledge, and skills. Consequently, CACREP-accredited counselor education programs and other counseling programs are training counselors increasingly capable of working with people that come from a variety of different backgrounds and training students from various cultural backgrounds. Also, increasingly counselor educators are also from diverse cultural backgrounds. The projection that the multicultural population in some of the nation's larger states (California, Texas, etc.) will continue to grow (Stadler, Suhyun, Cobia, Middleton, & Carney, 2006), indicates it is also likely that counselor education programs will continue to grow more diverse with growing numbers of international students. With these changing numbers in culturally diverse communities and in students enrolled in counselor training programs (Atkinson, Morten & Sue, 2003), the issue of cross-cultural counseling supervision is becoming increasingly critical.

Stadler et al. (2006) affirmed that cross-cultural supervision research continues to be in an emerging state, and to date no model or theory of supervision for supervising international students has been integrated into counseling supervisory models. In the 21st century it appears that awareness and research on the specific supervision needs of international students are needed because international counseling supervisees have stated that they are very selective in what information and feelings they share with their culturally different American supervisors (Gardener, 2002).

Gardener (2002) reported that students choose only to share what they believe their supervisors will understand. This could be an indicator that international counseling students may not be sharing all of their concerns and feelings in supervision in U.S. counselor education programs, and may not be receiving the most constructive supervision of their developing counseling skills. However, research in this area is expanding. For example, Mori, Inman and Caskie (2009) found in a sample of 104 international counseling students that level of acculturation predicted cultural discussion and satisfaction with their supervision.

The term cross-cultural supervision often is used to discuss cases in which the supervisor and the supervisee are from different racial/ethnic groups, yet share an American identity in which they were both born and raised within the U.S. culture (Estrada et al., 2004). International students have varying cultural background variables that can

influence how they should be supervised by U.S. supervisors (Poyrazli & Graham, 2007). However, too often these students are grouped into a category that only identifies them as international students (Jacob & Greggo, 2001). Yoon and Portman (2004) explained that current counseling and supervision theories and skills used to address the needs of U.S. racial/ethnic minorities are usually mistakenly generalized to international students. Leong and Choung (2002) emphasized the importance of creating alternative approaches for providing diverse international students with counseling training and supervision that take into account their differing needs.

### **A Culturally-Responsive Supervision Model for Supervisors Working with International Counseling Students**

Many textbooks in counseling programs may address multicultural issues, but most do not include issues facing international individuals (Nilsson & Wang, 2008; Yoon & Portman, 2004); they make the mistake of grouping all culturally diverse individuals in to one category. Currently, no texts present a model on supervising international students in counseling programs (Poyrazli, Arbona, Nora, McPherson, & Pisecco, 2002). Criticism of the exclusion of the needs of international students in counseling programs has centered on the curriculum and practicum/internship experiences of traditional training programs (Gardener, 2002). Issues related to practicum/internship experiences are diverse and range from insufficient discussion of supervisees' feelings and attitudes concerning cultural differences to insufficient experience with culturally diverse supervisees to lack of discussion of expectations of supervision in the counseling practicum/internship (Cook, 1994; Pedersen, 1991; Priest, 1994).

Within this article, we propose a model to guide counselor educators supervising international students in counselor education programs. The model contains four components: (a) building rapport and developing a relationship with the student; (b) discussing cultural similarities and differences and how these might impact the supervisory relationship; (c) setting supervisee/supervisor expectations; and (d) checking in with the student regarding thoughts and feelings regarding the process of supervision and training. It is important to note that these components are not ordered steps, but continuous stages of supervision.

#### **Developing a Trusting Relationship with the Student**

Like in any counseling relationship, the power of the supervisory relationship should not be overlooked. Supervisors should aim from the beginning of the relationship to demonstrate empathy, unconditional positive regard and genuineness when supervising international students to aid in the development of a working supervisory relationship (Rogers, 1951). Some researchers have concluded that the relationship a supervisee has with his or her supervisor might be the most important ingredient for a successful supervisory relationship (Anaya & Cole, 2001). Consequently supervisors should make this their first and continued goal when working with an international counseling student.

Empathy, unconditional positive regard and genuineness help develop a trusting relationship. Research in the past has shown the power that trust can have on a counseling or supervisory relationship (Rogers, 1951). Trust can ensure that international students approach their supervisors whenever they experience issues and concerns in their practica and internship sites and even in classrooms. Consequently, trust in these supervision relationships can mean a lot in helping international counseling students have a positive training experience in the U.S.

### **Discussing Cultural Similarities and Differences**

In addition to the working supervisory alliance, acknowledging the cultural differences between the supervisor and the supervisee from the onset of the relationship can be useful and it has been generally thought that the supervisor should be the one to bring up such differences (Nilsson & Wang, 2008). Research suggests that to address the needs of culturally diverse students, racial and cultural differences should be recognized and supervisors should be at ease when discussing racial and cultural concerns with their supervisees (Gardener, 2002). All American born supervisors should pay great attention to cultural issues when working with international students and should not be afraid to interact with these students (Nilsson & Dodds, 2006) and ask them questions about their culture. The supervisor might want to start a discussion on how the culture of the counseling student differs from his or her own and make it clear to the student he or she is here to help them navigate their training experiences and as such communicating and understanding differences are important. Often, international students may be faced with the same cultural mismatch outside of the supervisory relationship and with the clients with whom they interact with at their internship sites. Daniels, D'Andrea, and Kim (1999) found communication to be the most pertinent issue in the case study of an Asian American school counselor trainee and a U.S. supervisor. This finding emphasizes the importance of open discussion in what can seem like taboo topics in supervision.

### **Setting Supervisee/Supervisor Expectations**

In their efforts to establish a working supervisory alliance with their international supervisees, supervisors should make it clear early in relationship what their expectations for supervision is (Nilsson & Wang, 2008). Not only will this assist the trainee in knowing what to expect but it will also lay the groundwork for a trusting and open relationship. Some researchers have highlighted several cross-cultural conflicts in supervision that included varying interpersonal style, counseling goals and ideas about the role of the supervisor and supervisee and recommended that the supervisor should encourage the counseling student to collaboratively specify roles, expectations for feedback, ways to attend to cultural misconstruction and ways in which inadvertent racism could occur in their relationship (Daniels et al., 1999).

Setting goals requires some level of cultural sensitivity; it demands that U.S. born supervisors take multicultural supervision approaches into account versus simply abiding by Western and/or ethnocentric ways of perceiving differences in counseling behaviors

and opinions. It can be very hurtful to students if supervisors judge them based on their home-countries' background, cultures, values, and/or behavioral and social norms (Gardener, 2002). International students may demonstrate cultural differences in terms of their concepts of time, their use of space in counseling, or their value orientations (Gardener, 2002; Sue & Sue, 2007). For example in many international cultures it is believed to be disrespectful to look someone of authority directly in his/her eyes (Pandit, 2007). We suggest that supervisors not interpret what international students do or say in the same manners they interpret American born students' actions or words (Yeh & Inose, 2003). Instead, supervisors should request additional explanation from international supervisees regarding the supervisees' intentions in counseling interventions and case conceptualizations.

### **Checking in Regarding the Process**

Lastly, supervisors should periodically check in with their international supervisees; they should "check in" to see how the students are handling the supervisory and learning process. Supervisors should give students a chance to ask questions and give them feedback on the process of supervision and training. This is a time for the supervisee to express any further concerns and the supervisor should respond with the same empathy, unconditional positive regard and genuineness portrayed at the onset of the supervisory relationship (Rogers, 1951). The authors believe that this "checking in" process should happen as often as every supervision session, because even if the student has nothing new he or she would like to share, it can help communicate supervisory caring and deepen the relationship with the supervisee.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

It is imperative at this time in the counseling profession that future research focuses on the effectiveness of recommendations and proposed models regarding international students' training experiences in U.S.-based counseling programs. In order to build on and possibly adjust the presented model of supervision specific for international counseling students and U.S. supervisors, future research should include both quantitative and qualitative approaches with international counselors-in-training in U.S. institutions. This research would aid in investigating international students' needs as well as their current experiences with counselor training and supervision. In addition, future research could include investigations with international graduates of U.S. counseling programs that could provide perspectives on their supervision experiences during their training and post-graduation. Future research designs can be drawn from past cross-cultural supervision literature and research with U.S. racial/ethnic minority students and manipulated to investigate international counseling students' supervision needs and experiences.

## Conclusion

The numbers of international students are increasing in counseling programs in the U.S. As a result the supervision needs of these students are of growing importance. A review of the literature has found that the issues facing counselor education programs and counselor educators supervising international counseling students are complex and multifaceted. It appears that counselor educators have an obligation to challenge themselves and their colleagues to develop guidelines and models that meet the needs of these international counselors-in-training in U.S. universities. In our view, it is apparent that current counselor educators can serve as role models to our future generations of counselor educators and supervisors by taking the risks associated with asking questions, being flexible, and trying to amend the issues involved in counseling supervision relationships with international students.

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