Understanding Chinese students in a Global Context

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Challenges of Chinese Students in Transition to American Campuses

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Abstract

Nowadays, more and more Chinese students choose to study in American higher education institutions. As long as the number of Chinese students increases at American colleges, there are various problems that have occurred regarding the increasing number. This research conducted a qualitative study to understand Chinese students based on their own expectation, personal consideration, academic consideration and cultural consideration. This research provided better understanding of Chinese students by connecting with their cultural background and recognize the major challenges that Chinese students are facing.

QUESTION: What are the challenges facing Chinese students in transition to an American institution?

The challenges facing Chinese students in transition to an American institution are changing overtime. The motivation to study in America has great influence on the challenges that participants are facing.

Purpose

Why do Chinese students act differently than other college students? What constitutes success for a Chinese student? The purpose of this research study is to explore what Chinese students think their greatest struggles are in American higher education. The research question what affects Chinese student's success on American campuses was examined in a qualitative study. This research can provide better understanding of Chinese students by connecting with their cultural background and recognize the major challenges that Chinese students are facing.

Methodology

The sample was chosen by collecting data from the university regarding undergraduate students from China and contacting those individuals regarding participation in the study. A total of 24 students chosen by purposeful sampling were interviewed in focus groups. There were three focus groups: one group consisted of male students, one consisted of female students, while the third one included female and male students. The researcher conducted the interviews in Chinese by using inquiry-based questions to get more detail information or dig the insights behind their experiences. The data collected from interviews was transcribed by a research group of three bilinguistic researchers. The proceeded data was sent to each participate through email to ensure that the researcher keep the original meaning of the raw data.

What are the challenges facing Chinese students in class?

This research showed that class discussion and group work is the biggest challenge overtime. Most participants state that language is not a barrier "when I get used to English lectures" or "if there is PowerPoint available online". However, it is still difficult for Chinese students to find their own values in class discussion and group work. Participants felt it challenging to be included into American classroom because they came from a different education system, which is more test-focused and career-focused. Teacher is the authority of knowledge in Chinese classroom while the role of student is to listen carefully and to take notes. Keeping silent and saving all the question till the end of class is one way to show students' respect to the teacher. More than 90% female participants mentioned that they kept silent because of their "different cultural background"-- "Even though I talk in class and bring up ideas to group meeting, American students cannot understand me anyway"; "Things that make sense to me do not sound logically organized to them"; "My part of group work always be deleted or abbreviated into a small piece after their final edition".

What is the biggest barrier to Chinese students to live on-campus?

Participants living on-campus report higher involvement level than those living off-campus. More than 75% students living off-campus have never been involved in out-of-classroom activities. Less than one third participants live in on-campus accommodation. Half of participants that live off-campus are required to live on-campus so they choose to keep paying for on-campus accommodation after moving out. These students have something in common: no financial pressure, living with girlfriend/boyfriend, reporting low involvement level outside classroom. Different focus group showed different emphasis on the barrier to live on-campus. The female group focused on roommate relationship and incompatible personalities. The male group focused on the price of housing and hazing problems. The mix-gender group focused on the sex chaos and potential safety problems. All the three groups considered different habits and customs as the most influential factor: "It is inconvenience to live on-campus because of different eating and living problems." The common suggestion to keep students living on-campus is to offer Chinese food in the dining services and to offer Chinese RA to help them.

Results

Have Chinese students ever used student services on campus?

This research showed that time spent in the United States and motivation to study abroad can relate to the most important factor in developing interpersonal relationship. Participants spent longer time in the United States consider personality as the most important factor. Participants spent around one year in the United States consider culture background and common interests as the most important factor because it is important for them to "understand other's jokes" and "have topics to talk about". Students spent less than 6 months in America think that language is the most important factor for them to make friends in America.

Literature Review

According to "Open Doors," the number of Chinese students enrolled at American colleges jumped 23 percent between 2010 and 2011, to 194,029, which is 25% of the total number of international students enrolled at American colleges. The need to address global-centered settings becomes more and more urgent in American higher education field. According to Hyun, Quinn, Madon, & Lustig (2007)'s research, Chinese students are less likely to use counseling services than other international students. According to Huang's (2006) research, 92% of the participants reported having difficulties in understanding English academic lectures although they have obtained high TOEFL scores. It is influential how Chinese students identify themselves in American education settings. If they consider themselves as 'culture others' (Zheng, 2010), it will be really difficult for them to connect with American students and get the sense of community on campus. Paltridge, Mayson, & Schapper (2010) suggested international students living on-campus to be connected with others and to come through cross-cultural transition period.

Future Directions

American universities set up curriculum and co-curriculum based on the assumption that every student has some certain knowledge or skills, which is unfamiliar for international students. Even though American campuses have different resources to serve the various needs of students, many are not functional for international students if they are unaware of how to use these services. Future research need to be done on how to help institutions become global-centered instead of American-centered. However, type and location of those education setting and family background, personality and gender of participants may lead to different results.