
NASPA

JOURNAL

Published by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, Inc.

Volume 23, Number 4, Spring, 1986

ARTICLES

- 2 Studying Stress Among Student Services Professionals: An Interactional Approach**
Robert D. Brown, Steve Bond, James Gerndt, LuAnn Krager, Barbara Krantz, Mark Lukin, and Dave Prentice
- 11 Student Services and the Question of Leadership**
Gerald D. Welch
- 15 Keeping in Step with the Institution: A Study of Executive Administrators' Attitudes about the Purpose of Student Services**
Stephen E. Roth
- 21 Setting Priorities for Student Affairs Programs for Budgetary Purposes: A Case Study**
Linda S. Moxley and B. Wayne Duke
- 29 On Line, On Time, Just Fine: A Legend**
Hyrum H. Huskey, Jr.
- 33 Involvement of Professional Staff in Conducting an Organizational Study**
Janice A. Thibodeau and Carment L. Vance
- 40 Governing Boards: The Neglected Resource**
Russell J. DeRemer
- 48 Law Student Stress**
James Archer, Jr., and Martha M. Peters
- 55 Fostering International Understanding: Cross-cultural Issues in International Residential Settings**
Gail S. Eisen
- 60 POINT OF VIEW: Student Affairs Careers: For Specialists or Generalists?**
Bruce A. Conroe

Fostering International Understanding: Cross-cultural Issues in International Residential Settings

Three areas where international students have cultural differences are described and programs for residential halls are suggested.

ABSTRACT

This article presents a discussion of cross-cultural issues that commonly arise in international living environments and that pose challenges to administrative, support, and residential staff. Specific examples of cultural differences are addressed in the areas of dietary laws and customs, contrasting approaches to socializing and entertainment, and obstacles to complete language comprehension. Suggestions for increasing participation in community events are presented, as are examples of programming approaches that employ a sensitivity to the distinct needs of individuals residing in an international academic community.

INTRODUCTION

As any traveler who has visited another country with a different culture for an extended period of time can attest, the initial months of adjustment—to different language patterns, unfamiliar foods, divergent social values, and contrasting attitudes toward time—are usually the periods of greatest emotional strain and insecurity. In an era of widespread contacts among disparate members of the world community and increasing numbers of international students enrolling in U.S. universities to pursue their studies, it is beneficial for the administrative and support staff of international living environments to strive for a deeper understanding of cultural diversity. All too often, a common expectation in

Gail S. Eisen, Graduate Residence Hall Director, The
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, 48109

traditional residence halls is that international students are visiting the United States as a learning experience and, as a corollary of this learning endeavor, these students should be expected to adjust independently to the distinctive cultural patterns of interaction prevalent within U.S. student communities.

This attitude fails to recognize a host of cultural differences in individual needs and interpersonal relations that may pose obstacles to the ready assimilation of many international students. Awareness of cultural differences has distinct implications for student programming in the areas of social, cultural, and educational events.

I present in this essay several specific examples of cross-cultural issues that are likely to be of concern to resident staff members affiliated with international living environments. These examples are based upon my experiences as a staff member at the Vera Baits Houses, a graduate and upper-division residential unit of 1,200 students at The University of Michigan. Each year approximately 40% of the Baits population consists of students from countries other than the United States, and their presence serves as a reservoir of knowledge and experience that adds to the richness of a rigorous university education.

OBSTACLES TO LANGUAGE COMPREHENSION

Language barriers are among the most common obstacles encountered by international students who are just beginning an undergraduate or graduate program in the U.S. Language proficiency is frequently taken for granted by administrative and residence staff members when, in fact, international students may not always completely comprehend English. For example, a number of students who have studied English in a classroom situation, but who have never had extensive opportunity to practice the language on a daily basis, are troubled by the rapid speech patterns natural among native speakers. It is helpful for all individuals working closely with international students to strive for precision in the use of both words and concepts, to attempt to enunciate clearly, and to be conscious of the pace of their speech. They must strive, also, for an alertness to nonverbal signals of comprehension or confusion, which are frequently evident when a student is listening to the speaker's remarks. Note, however, that in some countries (e.g., Japan, Thailand, and Burma), politeness dictates that the listener nod his or her head and smile in approval, despite the fact that he or she may not completely comprehend.

The use of idioms is particularly disconcerting to a majority of international students, as they quite simply have had neither the time nor the opportunity to encounter the wide range of contexts essential for understanding a diversity of idioms. A lack of comprehension of American idioms can easily lead to misunderstandings and, in some cases, may pose serious dangers.

The Baits complex publishes a weekly newsletter that informs residents of administrative announcements and house-related activities. One issue of this newsletter notified residents of a routine "fire drill" scheduled to take place in one of the halls. The expression "fire drill" was entirely unfamiliar to virtually all of the international students in that house, and one confused resident conceptualized a very literal association of the term. He knew that a "drill" was a tool of some sort, and he knew the meaning of "fire," but he was perplexed as

to why his building would be producing a tool for creating fire. The student felt too embarrassed to seek clarification from a staff member but finally did turn to one of the U.S.-born residents for an explanation.

It is recommended that in both written and oral communication, individuals working in international settings strive to avoid idioms as much as possible or, perhaps even better, to provide a supplementary explanation that is not ambiguous. For example, the newsletter sentence once forecasting house fire drills has been expanded to one full paragraph, now phrased in much the following manner:

A fire drill is scheduled for February 24th. This means that we shall be testing our fire alarm system and practicing emergency evacuation procedures in the event of a real fire in the future. Please do not be startled by ringing bells at 3 p.m.

Other, more benign examples of misunderstanding revolving around the use of idioms are easy to find. Consider the advertising of programs such as a semiformal dance or a coffee house evening program. These expressions alone, posted on large publicity boards or documented in a house-related events calendar, are not enough to generate interest in these programs for most international students. These expressions fail to provide enough details about the specific entertainment to be provided and, in the case of the semiformal dance, no indication is given that a particular type of attire is expected of guests.

DIETARY LAWS AND CUSTOMS

A second major area in which cross-cultural differences are prevalent is dietary laws and customs. This is a critical area of difference, but one which is frequently neglected in planning events where food is featured.

Among practicing Muslims, for example, eating pork and drinking alcohol are strictly prohibited. It is important to present alternative food items at all events so that members of this group sense that their participation is welcomed. Further, Muslims observe Ramadan, a month in the Islamic calendar that is commemorated by fasting from sunrise to sunset. Food and water are prohibited by day, but after sundown these items may be taken in moderation. Because Ramadan is tied to the lunar calendar, the specific month of fasting varies from year to year. It is wise to note the dates of this holiday and to be aware that some residents will refrain from participating in certain daylight social events during this period.

Another example of dietary difference may be found among East Indian students. A large percentage of the Indian subcontinent is vegetarian and some Indians have never included eggs in their diets. The roots of this custom are linked partly to Hinduism and partly to culture, and it is important to be sensitive to this group of students in designing meals for house-wide or complex-wide events.

Although this idea is not restricted to international students, it is helpful to be aware that observant Jewish students will never consume pork or partake of fish varieties that do not have fins and scales, and will avoid mixing milk and meat products at the same meal. Kosher food cooperatives have come into existence in recent years to accommodate the needs of students who adhere to the dietary system of Kashrut, and residents may choose to become affiliated with one of these food service options whenever they are available.

Dietary practices are ingrained in our cultural consciousness. Such practices are imbued with meaning; they trigger memories of family traditions and religious rituals that are frequently laden with deep emotion. These dietary customs would never be violated at home, and there is conflict about doing so abroad. International students greatly appreciate residence staff members who display a knowledge and awareness of these dietary differences and who grant priority to providing alternative food and beverage choices at social events that involve meals.

An important component of dietary difference is the diversity in methods of preparing food and the types of foods preferred by individuals of different cultural groups. In housing units where residents are provided with either individual or communal cooking facilities, it is not uncommon for U.S.-born students to complain of the unfamiliar odors emanating from the kitchen area, or for demeaning remarks to be made by members of one cultural group targeted at the cooking methods and food preferences of members of another group. In the case of communal kitchen facilities, it is often useful to emphasize to all residents during the first general house or corridor meeting that the kitchen is specifically intended for everyone's use. This communal facility is, in fact, an instrument that has great potential for helping to achieve the goal of establishing a comfortable environment in which all community members feel at home.

APPROACHES TO SOCIALIZING AND ENTERTAINMENT

Another critical concept that should be recognized in international living environments is that differences exist across cultures in levels and ways of relating to others. Diversity in programming is, therefore, of paramount importance.

In many U.S. dormitory environments, there is a strong tendency for both staff members and individual residents to propose activities geared toward the interests of a narrow, mainstream American audience. Specifically, there is a tendency at house-related parties to increase the volume of music in such a way that conversation is impossible and individuals are prevented from getting to know one another in any but the most superficial manner. Further, when alcohol is included at functions for graduate students above the legal drinking age, the result is the alienation of a significant percentage of the resident population who choose to refrain from drinking. The entire tone and mood of such social events is not conducive to learning about the lives and experiences of others, and for many international students who have spent their undergraduate years living in single-sex hostels in their home countries, attendance at such parties may appear far from worthwhile.

Further, this atmosphere may also meet with resistance from some students who have grown up in American culture but do not subscribe to these mainstream forms of entertainment. Both for individuals heralding from quiet cultures and U.S. students who believe in relating to others on a deeper plane, there is often a fear of ridicule or ostracism at the hands of the more aggressive program planners when they consider suggesting alternative social activities. Thus, it is beneficial for staff members to be mindful of the more quiet members of the residential community and to encourage resident planning groups to formulate social functions that do not unconsciously alienate members of the community.

RECOMMENDED PROGRAMS AND SUGGESTIONS

Several examples of programming approaches and events that have proven highly successful in our variegated community include the following:

- International slide shows featuring the slide collections of residents from a variety of nations. These residents are usually willing to provide a brief commentary during or after the presentation to help the audience gain a more thorough understanding of the region being viewed.
- House field trips, consisting of simple afternoon or day excursions to local museums, theaters, or films; recreational events such as swimming or bowling; and outings involving a picnic or canoeing at local parks or public gardens.
- International potluck dinner programs.
- House-related parties and programs that incorporate the holidays of other cultures as major themes. For example, Chinese New Year parties, International New Year's celebrations, and a South of the Border Fiesta Night have all been used successfully as evocative themes for house-wide events that foster international exchange and understanding.
- An annual or semiannual International Day event featuring food, arts and crafts exhibits, music, and dance from the various cultural groups represented within the residential community.
- Invited presentations on culture-shock and various topics related to individual and group adjustment to the cultural norms of the United States presented by representatives of the campus-based International Students' Center.

National pride is typically very strong for students studying at a great distance from home, and individuals are frequently enthusiastic when given the opportunity to describe their cultures to an audience. Also, U.S.-born students should be encouraged to present slides and exhibits of their communities and their travels, so that cross-cultural learning flows smoothly in both directions.

Participation in community events may be somewhat low among newly arrived international students, and this may be particularly true for graduate students who are often thoroughly engrossed in their teaching or research. Suggestions for increasing participation among international students include the following:

- Whenever possible, make an effort to extend personal invitations to international students to participate in activities. Visit a resident's room or leave a short note in his or her mailbox encouraging attendance at a given program.
- Invite residents from all nations to participate in event planning and committee work. Do not leave it to the most aggressive members of the community to do all of the volunteering, for the result will be a series of one-dimensional programs with a narrow appeal.
- Display a personal interest in learning about different cultures, religions, and national holidays.
- Master residents' names very early, even though some names will be difficult to pronounce at the onset.
- Strive to extend a warm sense of hospitality to residents who visit your living area for conversation or counseling, as hospitality customs play a principal role in establishing interpersonal relationships and in forming a basis for future trust in many other cultures of the world.
- Avoid using the term "foreign students" in both written and oral communication, as this expression reveals an ethnocentrism that places emphasis on human differences as opposed to essential human similarities.

In conclusion, it is beneficial to weave a global perspective throughout the multitude of programming tasks demanded by the residence staff role. All students come to the university as learners, and we are sometimes fortunate to have, in close proximity, a wealth of resource people who offer us a tremendous potential for learning. Cross-cultural dialogue and exploration are by definition *self-discovery*, and this too is one of the principal ideals of a liberal education.