Acculturation Stress and Depression Among First-Year International Graduate Students from China and India at the University of South Carolina

by

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ABSTRACT

This cohort study used a mixed-methods pretest/posttest measurement study design. The quantitative method was used to explore the relationship between acculturation stress and depression among first-year international graduate students from China and India enrolled at the University of South Carolina (UofSC), examine the role that social support plays in that relationship, and identify changes in acculturation, social support, and depression over one academic year. The qualitative method helped to further explore how Chinese and Indian international graduate students experienced acculturation stress and to what extent social support helped them cope with their stress.

The sample included 55 students. Primary data were collected through two-time online surveys which consisted of demographic and psychosocial measures of acculturation stress, depression, and perceived social support. Focus group discussion refined and expanded findings gleaned from quantitative data analysis. A hierarchal regression analysis revealed that acculturation stress was a significant predictor of depression among participants, and the relationship between acculturation stress and depression did not differ by the availability of social support. Paired samples t-tests revealed that social support increased significantly between Time 1 and Time 2. Three acculturation stress-related themes emerged from focus group discussions: lack of diversity on campus, fear of making mistakes, and microaggression. Social
support-related themes included a tradition of “paying it forward,” active engagement of academic advisors, and informational support offered by the International Student Services (ISS).

Many participants experienced acculturation stress during their transition to the UofSC campus, in part due to conflicting cultural values and different coping strategies. This stress often led to depressive symptoms. Over the year, participants built stronger support networks with co-nationals, academic advisors, and the ISS. While co-nationals offered socioemotional support, the ISS provided informational support. The relationship with academic advisors seemed to positively influence participants’ emotional well-being. Practical implications were elucidated for university services and programs. Further research using a larger sample from a more diverse pool is needed to provide stronger empirical support for the study findings.