

## International Students' Impressions of Counselling

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In an increasingly globalized society, there is currently a record number of students from abroad studying in Canada (i.e., international students) (Government of Canada, 2012). Like any other student, international students are susceptible to mental health issues, such as anxiety, mood disorders, and substance abuse. Without intervention, these issues can lead to adverse academic, career, and social development (Kitzrow, 2003). A survey by the University of Idaho Student Counseling Center (2000) found that counselling treatment is useful for at least 77% of the clients who attend, by helping them gain the skills needed to overcome or work with their illness (as cited in Kitzrow, 2003). Even though most clients who use campus-based counselling services find it beneficial, studies have found that international students not only underutilize counselling services, but are more likely to drop out after the initial session (Chen & Lewis, 2011). Since the number of international students is increasing and counselling services have been shown to be useful for students from North America, one must wonder why international students do not use these services. What do international students' impressions of campus-based counselling tell us about the ways we need to improve these services?

According to Sandhu (1994), counselling continues to be stigmatized in many cultures, and so "many international students would rather suffer with psychological difficulties than speak to a

professional counselor due to stigmas associated with mental illness and personal competency” (as cited in Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004, p. 134). This stigma is important to understand because it influences the decisions that students make in determining whether or not to attend counselling. If students believe that going to counselling could have the potential to harm them, and should only be only used as a last resort, then they may feel more reluctant to seek these services.

Perhaps what is more telling is that even if international students begin counselling, they are more likely to drop out after the initial session compared to majority students (Chen & Lewis, 2011). According to Shea and Yeh (2008), students from Asian countries were unlikely to continue counselling because of “a lack of culturally competent personnel, contradictions between values held by the Asian clients and the Western model of counseling ... and lack of culturally responsive services” (p. 158). Yoon and Jepsen (2008) found that just over half of the participants (Asian international students) in their study were concerned about their level of English when speaking with their counsellors (i.e., they were concerned about their ability to accurately convey in words what they were feeling and thinking to the counsellor). Luzio-Lockett (1998) described this language barrier as the “squeezing effect” (p. 220). She argued that the inability to share one’s experience and feel empathy from another restricts an individual’s potential for personal growth.

It is this lack of understanding and connection that leads many international students to not want to participate in counselling. Chen and Lewis (2011) uncovered some of the disparities in cultural understanding, and concluded that counsellors treated clients and their families “either very differently (based on stereotypes), or exactly the same as they

treat members of the majority culture without regard for beliefs and behaviors associated with the family's unique ethno-cultural milieu" (p. 311). Furthermore, Zhang and Dixon (2010) reported that when counsellors used standard counselling techniques, Asian international students perceived them to be "less expert, less attractive, and less trustworthy than those who were culturally responsive" (p. 51, as cited in Nilsson, Berkel, Flores, & Lucas, 2004).

With this examination of international students' use of counselling, it appears that many international students may be hesitant about attending campus-based counselling services because of its inaccessibility. Evidently, seeking mental health counselling is stigmatized for many international students, so if they do attend and have a bad experience, it could be discouraging for them to try again or seek alternative services. Due to this potential stigma towards counselling, counselling services should be advertised in a way that addresses this population's needs. Counsellors may need to be educated on the issues that this client population may face, as well as the multicultural competencies needed to address them. Additionally, a focus on strengthening the therapeutic relationship from the initial visit may assist in retaining international student clients. It is through potential improvements such as these that campus-based counselling services may prove to be an effective and accessible service for all students.

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