

The Cultural Barriers of Mental Health: International Students' Access to Mental Health Services in Higher Education

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Tags

Crisis-Management; Cross-Cultural Issues; Education Abroad; Ethics, Equity, and Social Justice; International Student and Scholar Services; Student Learning and Development; Student Services; University/Higher Education

Setting

The case takes place in the Intensive English Program (IEP) at Ashton Lake College, a community college offering select four-year degrees in the United States. The school has a population of 10,000 students, which includes over 1,000 international students. They have five mental health counselors who are able to provide free, short-term care for all students at the school.

Case

Duc was an 18 year-old Vietnamese student who came to the United States to become more proficient in English and to get an undergraduate degree in Business Administration. He was studying English at the intermediate level and was due to transfer into Ashton Lake's full-time Business Administration program within the next year. He had often thought of himself as a social outcast and had difficulty making friends in his own country. However, he had a lot of interest in politics and entrepreneurship, and he got good grades in school. When Duc came to the United States, though, his situation got worse. His grades and attendance dropped, and he got in verbal

disagreements with the other students. He felt he had no friends. He also joined a radical political group on campus, and he became suicidal.

In class one day, Duc began crying and expressing a desire to kill himself. The teacher called for one of the counselors from student services, who came and escorted Duc to their office. Duc met with the counselor several times over the next few weeks. They were able to calm his suicidal thoughts, but the counselling staff suspected that Duc had a serious mental health condition that required regular therapy and the intervention of a psychiatrist. Ashton Lake College did not have a psychiatrist on staff, and their counselling center was not equipped to assist students requiring long-term treatment. The staff felt that they simply were not able or qualified to help a student in Duc's situation.

Although Duc recognized that he was experiencing a mental health breakdown, he was hesitant to seek psychiatric help for a number of reasons. First of all, he could not afford to pay for the therapy and his student health insurance would not cover the number of sessions that he would need. Additionally, he thought going to therapy would make him seem weak or sick. Mental illness was considered taboo in his home country, and it was also seen as a significant source of shame for one's entire family. Duc and his parents were afraid of the potential social and professional repercussions that their family might face if anyone in their community found out that he had sought such treatment. Perhaps most difficult for Duc, though, was the language barrier. Duc did not feel that he could fully express himself to any of the counselors because his English was too limited and none of them spoke Vietnamese. He did not see the usefulness in attending therapy if he could not speak in his native language.

The counselling staff checked in with Duc once a week, but he was still reluctant to speak with them. He began to display extreme mood swings and he showed increasing interest in radical, violent political ideals. Several students mentioned that they felt unsafe around Duc. The teachers were uncomfortable having him in class due to the comments that he made regarding his political beliefs. However, the administration agreed to allow Duc to remain in school because he had not technically failed his classes, nor had he specifically threatened to harm anyone. About six weeks after his initial breakdown in class, Duc's grades fell to the point that he could no longer complete the program. The Director of International Programs, in conjunction with support from the admissions office and the Business Administration program, decided to expel Duc and to terminate his SEVIS record.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- What additional steps, if any, might the counseling staff have taken to ensure Duc's well-being?
- Was the school justified in terminating Duc's SEVIS record, or should they have allowed him to remain in the program until the end of the term?
- Should the institution have expelled Duc sooner, due to the complaints from the teachers and the other students?
- To what extent should mental health personnel on college campuses be trained to work with international students?
- How can we make campus mental health services more affordable and accessible to international students?

- Which resources would help higher education institutions to provide access to a wider range of mental health services (clinical psychologists, psychiatrists, etc.), especially to international students?