

*Teaching Assertiveness to International Students in the United States*

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Asian Conference on Psychology and the Behavioral Sciences 2015  
Official Conference Proceedings

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## **Introduction**

In recent years the number of international students around the world has risen sharply, and the United States has been the most popular destination for students who want to attend college in a foreign country (Coughlan, 2011). Students from Asian countries constitute 62% of the total number of international students in the United States, and by far the largest number of Asian students enrolled in American colleges and universities come from the People's Republic of China. Recent estimates indicate that Chinese students account for more than 20% of the international college student population in the U.S. (Institute of International Education, 2011).

## **Cultural Differences and Acculturative Stress**

Although the nature and level of acculturative stress vary from student to student, it is common for Asian international students in the United States to experience homesickness, culture shock, language difficulties, racial discrimination, and social isolation (Yeh & Inose, 2003). Fundamental differences between Asian and non-Asian cultures contribute to acculturative stress. Compared to their American peers, Asian students are often more reserved, less assertive, and more reluctant to express personal opinions. They tend to have a more collectivist social orientation, and to feel discomfort with American individualism and competitiveness. In comparison to American students, Asian students tend to be modest about their accomplishments (Liu, 2009).

Cultural differences often lead to negative social consequences for Asian international students in the United States. Coming from societies with a more collectivist orientation, Asian students often have different expectations of friendships than their American counterparts. This can lead them to experience their relationships with Americans as superficial, and to feel disappointed and discouraged about their initial hopes of forming deep and meaningful relationships with American students (Mori, 2000).

Major differences in the Asian and American educational systems also contribute to acculturative stress. Compared to American classrooms, Asian classrooms tend to be more formal, with students adopting a more passive and receptive mode (Chen, 1999; Mori, 2000). The adjustment to the norms of an American classroom can be difficult, as evidenced by the following quotations from Asian international students:

“In my country I listened more to lectures. Here there is more class discussion, group activities, interaction among students.”

“Here I spend a lot of time in class, but I don't feel as though I learn as much. I don't take away as much information.”

“I had trouble at first knowing what my role in class was. The atmosphere was freestyle. Should I say something? Should I just listen?”

Ultimately Asian international students in the United States must decide whether and to what extent they want to maintain their cultural values and identities or, alternatively, flex to American cultural values and develop attitudes and behaviors that will contribute to their comfort and success in an American educational environment. This process involves increasing one's awareness of interpersonal and intrapersonal conflicts, such as the tension between the self and the collective, and the

conflict between Asian and non-Asian values. One must also reflect on one's options with regard to compromising. For example, should students assert themselves in contradiction to collectivist expectations?

### **Benefits of Assertiveness Training**

The goal of assertiveness training is to teach individuals how to express their thoughts, feelings, and wishes while being respectful of the feelings and needs of others. Assertiveness, which can be defined as standing up for oneself and at the same time being considerate towards others, is distinguished from three other communication styles: passive, in which a person fails to stand up for himself or herself and may be victimized or otherwise taken advantage of by others; aggressive, in which a person stands up for himself or herself but in a way that is disrespectful to and inconsiderate of others; and passive-aggressive, in which an individual's verbal communication and behavior are contradictory, e.g., one is acquiescent and passive, while the other is aggressive (Alberti, & Emmons, 2008; Bourne, 2015). Sarcasm and the "silent treatment" are examples of passive-aggressive communication.

Assertiveness training has been associated with increased academic confidence and enhanced sociocultural adjustment among international students in the United States (Lee, & Ciftci, 2014; Poyrazli, Arbona, Nora, McPherson, & Pisecco, 2002). Students who received assertiveness training were better able to complete academic tasks, speak up in class, and ask for help when needed. These are important behaviors for students to master in order to achieve success in the American educational system.

Assertiveness training was also associated with decreases in manifestations of acculturative stress, including depression, anxiety, homesickness, and feelings of guilt. Students who participated in assertiveness training reported not only decreases in these negative symptoms, but also increases in self-esteem and positive affect (Tavakoli, Lumley, Higazi, Slavin-Spenney, & Parris, 2009).

### **International Students at the University of Minnesota**

The University of Minnesota was established in 1851 in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul as Minnesota's flagship land-grant university. Its mission is to change lives through education, research and outreach. The university is the sixth largest in the United States, with more than 50,000 enrolled students and 4,000 employed faculty (University of Minnesota, 2015a).

During the 2013-2014 academic year almost 6,000 international students from more than 130 countries attended the University of Minnesota. International students make up more than 10% of the total student population, with approximately one-third coming from Asian countries. The largest number, more than 1,500, come from the People's Republic of China, followed by the Republic of Korea, Malaysia, Vietnam, and India (University of Minnesota, 2015b).

### **Assertiveness Training at the University of Minnesota**

University Counseling and Consulting Services (UCCS) offers individual and group counseling to University of Minnesota students. The Assertive Communication Workshop is one of the most popular psycho-educational groups available to students. It is offered every semester, including summer, and many students who register for the workshop are Asian international students.

The workshop consists of six sessions, each 90 minutes long, and co-led by two counselors. The sessions focus on students' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. The facilitators explain to students that one's thoughts and behaviors can be assertive or unassertive, and that thinking and acting assertively or unassertively affects one's emotions.

Facilitators begin by defining assertiveness as expressing and standing up for oneself while respecting the rights and needs of others. They help students to understand the differences between assertive, passive, aggressive, and passive-aggressive communication styles; to recognize what is and what is not assertive communication; and to distinguish between the benefits of assertive communication and its limitations. Important and useful discussions are held about cultural factors influencing one's decision about whether to communicate assertively. Facilitators and students often address differences between Asian and American communication norms, and consider what is and is not appropriate in different environments. This contributes to a deeper understanding of cultural differences, available communication options, and the importance of considering one's environment and audience.

Students engage in a self-assessment of their communication behaviors, e.g., with whom and in what situations do they tend to communicate in a passive, assertive, aggressive, or passive-aggressive manner? They also reflect on the beliefs and emotions that prevent them from communicating assertively. For example, one student might believe that communicating directly is rude, while another student might feel guilty about declining a friend's request, however unreasonable.

Practicing assertive communication behaviors is an important part of the workshop experience. Initially students respond to hypothetical situations, e.g., giving a friend some corrective feedback, asking a professor for help, declining a classmate's request. After this initial practice, they progress to work on situations they are struggling with in their own lives. Each participant is first asked to describe the problem situation in detail, including who is involved, what the issue is, what they fear might happen if they are assertive, and what they would like to accomplish. After describing a problem situation, the student is asked to develop an assertive response, which may include identifying his or her rights as a person, expressing thoughts and feelings, and asking for what he or she wants. Students role-play in pairs, giving each other feedback on their assertive communication skills. The real-life scenarios are then discussed with all the participants, who offer support, feedback, and suggestions. Students are encouraged to practice "in the real world," and are reminded that, like any new skill, improvement in assertive communication requires patience, practice, and persistence.

Student evaluations of the Assertive Communication Workshop are routinely very positive. International students in particular comment on gaining understanding of American communication norms and developing skills that will improve their social interactions in the United States. The following are some representative comments from workshop participants:

"The messages and concepts conveyed were great, and are things everyone could benefit from."

"This was an awesome workshop which has shown me there are so many things I can do in my life."

“The workshop was very helpful and informative, and everyone was supportive and inclusive.”

“The diversity of people with different forms of expression helped me become aware of my own communication style in different situations.”

### **Conclusion**

Assertiveness training can help international students, particularly students from Asian countries, to adjust to living and studying in the United States. It can enhance their understanding of American communication norms, increase their confidence when interacting with American students and professors, and decrease their experiences of discomfort and confusion in educational and social environments. When students learn how to think and behave assertively, as well as to manage difficult emotions that are often associated with assertive communication, they gain awareness of both self and others and a greater sense of empowerment.

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