

## ★ Cultural Blind Spots in Career Counselling with International Students

Satomi Yaji Chudasama shows us the results of her research into cultural difference and some practical ways of shining a torch into as yet unilluminated places.

*The US NCDA and Satomi have both kindly allowed us to reprint this article.*



The job search process for international students in the United States is challenging at the outset. In spite of the limited number of work visas available to them, a large number of international students continue to seek employment in this market. Career services professionals have made significant efforts to address their needs for support in the job search. In addition to these efforts, I believe that the awareness of certain cultural aspects highlighted in this article will enhance the effectiveness of these interactions.

This article outlines seven cultural differences and adjustment issues that can impact the career counselling experience. Please note that given the diversity of this population, not all factors are applicable to everyone, and personal differences must be considered.

The Seven Cultural Blind Spots:

1. **Individualism vs. Collectivism.** A challenge that some students encounter, especially those from collective societies, is the use of 'I...' sentences in describing their preferences. For example, when I ask why one is pursuing a technical career, the typical answers are "when you do well academically, you have to be a technical person," or "my family expects me to go into technology," and so forth. One student reported with surprise that employers had asked her why she chose her major and she had trouble answering that question. "You are expected to major in XYZ," she confessed.
2. **Self-Esteem.** "People treat me as if I don't know anything because I don't speak English fluently, but I am a PhD student." Such experiences can be frustrating for students. What they need most at this juncture is empathy and reassurance from the counsellor. However, every once in a while I come across students whose self-esteem is hurt due to 'insensitive' comments relating to their 'foreignness', 'accent', etc. Such situations call for confidence boosting measures on the part of the counsellor. Additionally, it is important to bear in mind that certain non-verbal behaviours of international students may be perceived as 'lack of confidence' within the host-country's cultural context. These behaviours may stem from individual self-presentation styles, influenced by their culture. It is a good idea to address these non-verbal behaviours as part of the career counselling interaction.
3. **Support System.** Not surprisingly, many international students arrive in the U.S. without a support network and have to establish one from scratch. Professional networks that career counsellors emphasise, however, can be confusing to many. Some claim, "People here don't care about others. They are too busy with their own priorities," while others say, "I don't know what to do." It is important for the counsellor to remind them that networking is crucial to the adjustment process and worth the time and effort invested, and then facilitate the process.
4. **Implication of Academic Success.** Academic performance is the most important factor that employers look for in candidates in some countries. Students from those countries are anxious to maintain high marks and can easily overlook other vital aspects of their personal and professional profile that may be attractive to employers. Therefore, educating students on the expectations of the host-country's employers and helping them focus on their strengths beyond academics is critical to the overall strategy to realise their full marketability.

5. **Sociocultural and Educational Adjustment.** For some international students from culturally distant countries, it is not unusual to take anywhere from a few months to over a year before feeling adjusted to the host-country's society. They have to work towards getting accustomed to a new educational system and sociocultural norms while coping with culture shock that may require reframing self-identity. Master's degree students in one to two year programmes looking for internships may especially be going through an overwhelming adjustment process while also learning job search norms that may differ significantly from those of their own countries.
6. **Who to Talk With About Careers.** Some societies value masculinity, whereas others emphasise deference to authority or the elder. Several surveys and focus groups conducted by myself and my former colleagues at Syracuse University with a sample of over 400 international students revealed that many of them prefer to speak with the elder and/or male figures about careers. When encountering this mind-set, it is helpful to emphasise the array of tools provided by career services offices and the expertise that career professionals have to offer to facilitate the interactions with them.
7. **Saving Face.** 'Saving face' is important in some cultures. Some students you work with have landed in the host-country with much expectation from their home countries and sometimes themselves. For some of them, success includes employment in the host-country regardless of how long they intend to stay. The shortage of work visas creates a tougher job market for them and therefore having a back-up plan is important. Some alternate plans may include employment in a third country or their home countries. Whatever the plan is, it is helpful to identify sources of pressure, types of expectations, values that make them feel successful, and strategies to tackle these challenges.

Tips for Career Counsellors:

- Focus on strengths and help students articulate them
- Create opportunities to share their experiences with other international students and international alumni
- Offer and support networking opportunities
- Reach out to them early by collaborating with the international students' office
- Treat them as unique individuals; consider them as experts on themselves, including their cultural experiences
- Encourage them to get involved in something non-academic
- Try understanding their lives overall (this is a nice way to show you care) and identify their strengths and challenges. This allows you to utilise a more holistic approach and find other areas in which they may need assistance.

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