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Uyghur refugees in higher education in the U.S.: Trauma and adaptation challenges

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Abstract

As the Uyghur community faces increased oppression, there are adverse effects on Uyghurs abroad. Those Uyghur students in higher education in the USA face unique stressors including family members being incarcerated and sudden financial changes. This brief explains the unique stressors these students face, how they navigate these stressors, and how universities could help Uyghurs who face these unique stressors. By identifying such stressors and students' coping mechanisms, the research team hopes to inform study abroad offices on how to support international refugee students in similar situations.

Aim

This phenomenological case study is designed to identify stressors associated with the unique experience of Uyghur students who began their studies in the USA before and through 2017. These students are those who have been directly impacted by the ongoing oppression of Uyghurs in China. The study hopes to identify stressors associated with the unique circumstances of students' higher education experience and how students are managing these stressors. The results of this study provide international student offices and other higher education administrators with information on how to support these students and others facing similar challenges.

Problem

Uyghurs are a Muslim Turkic ethno-linguistic minority group of northwest China, and one of the 55 ethnic groups officially recognized by the Chinese government. After a series of violent events in China, labeled as terrorist attacks and blamed on Uyghur extremists, the Chinese central government in 2015 passed counterterrorism legislation which effectively criminalized "any Uyghur expression of dissent or religiosity as well as many Uyghur cultural traditions as signs of terrorism or extremism" (Roberts, 2018, p. 246). Soon afterwards, Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslim individuals began to be detained in what the Chinese government refers to as 'vocational and training centers,' for behavior that may be seen by many as ordinary expressions of Islam. These behaviors include praying, fasting, eating breakfast before the sun comes up, going to a religious lecture, or going to a mosque, among other things (HRW 2018).

As a result of these detainment practices, Uyghur families have been separated without warning. Uyghurs abroad are unable to return to their families in China for fear of having their passport revoked or being detained. In addition, heightened security measures by the Chinese government in the Uyghur communities limits the information that can be communicated to family members living abroad. In some cases, these Uyghurs abroad are not even aware of the whereabouts of their loved ones. For students studying in the USA, they have experienced these sudden changes while they are simultaneously studying in their universities. This has led to increased stress among a population of college students across the United States who find themselves unexpectedly identifying as refugees in a new country.

Typically, international students face stressors related to culture shock/acculturation (Berry, 1987) and financial limitations (Situ et al., 1995) while refugee students often face these plus the added stressors of emotional health issues and being disconnected from their home community (Mangan & Winter, 2017).

Research Questions/Methods

Through snowball sampling, the research team contacted participants and conducted interviews with Uyghurs currently living in the United States who were enrolled in higher education institutes prior to and through 2017. These semi structured interviews included students from undergraduate and graduate programs with the goal of informing the following research questions:

- What stressors are Uyghur students facing in the USA?
- What steps are Uyghur students taking to navigate these stressors?
- What steps could universities take to help Uyghur students navigate these stressors?

Once the interviews were transcribed, both members of the research team coded each interview into themes. The resulting themes were then compared to narrow the themes and to ensure inter-rater reliability.

Findings

The findings of the research showed that, regardless of the stressor, almost all students described feelings of depression that made it difficult to concentrate on their coursework. The specific stressors described by students were: sudden financial changes, lack of trust with the home community (both Uyghur and Han Chinese), incarcerated family members, and lack of reliable communication from home.

The first stressor many students discussed were related to financial changes. In addressing this stressor, students discuss seeking help from International Student Services Offices. If this help is inadequate, some take accelerated course sequences to finish their coursework early. Next, students identified their lack of community as a source of stress. Berry (1987) describes building community with former compatriots is often seen as a way of mitigating stress in a new society. Uyghur students, however discuss the lack of trust with Chinese international students and Uyghur international students in the USA. They then seek new communities such as the Muslim Student Association or participating in sports leagues. Finally, students discuss the stressors associated with concern for family members back home. Aligning with Mangan & Winter's research on refugee students (2017), Uyghur students in this study are not typically seeking out mental health support to navigate these stressors because of the cultural stigma associated with this support or lack of knowledge on how it can be accessed.

Participants described areas where they feel universities could be more helpful in regards to their situation. These areas include the need to raise awareness of participants' situation among student service officers, faculty, and the student body and to provide financial assistance or alternative payment methods to better position students to complete their academic programs successfully.

Conclusion

Uyghur students described their stressors as being unique to themselves and their situation, but when each stressor is identified and addressed individually, they often align with other stressors associated with refugee students or international students. For example, while the situation surrounding Uyghurs losing contact suddenly with family members and not being able to communicate effectively is unique to their situation, the sudden financial changes could apply to other refugee and international students. Having campus faculty and staff gain awareness of international current events would help foster an inclusive environment for all international and refugee students, not just Uyghur students.

Author Biography

Brian McCommons is a second year PhD student at Drexel University in the Policy and Leadership track. Prior to Drexel, Brian spent 2 years in South Korea and 5 years in Bolivia working in both K-12 and higher education settings. His current research continues to focus on international education at all levels but his interest is mostly in higher education. More specifically, Brian is continuing to focus on Bolivia and language policy in the country as it relates to a continually changing political environment.

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