How to Advocate … for or as International Students

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Authorship note: Both Diksha and Lamia contributed equally to this Advocacy Q&A.

What is your positionality?

**Lamia:** I am a South Asian, international student from India, and I moved to the United States on a student visa. I was born and raised in the suburbs of Mumbai, a metropolitan city where I completed my undergraduate and graduate (Master’s in Clinical Psychology) training. As a cis woman belonging to a religious minority, I have witnessed and experienced interpersonal, sociopolitical, and systemic vulnerabilities. I also recognize my privilege in being able to independently relocate and pursue school psychology in the United States. My personal and professional experiences are rooted in values of equity, social justice, and community care. I believe in the healing power of stories while recognizing the harm of single stories.

**Diksha:** I identify as a nonbinary, interfaith South Asian BIPOC woman whose family is originally North Indian. That said, I was raised in South India and the United Arab Emirates before moving to the United States as an international undergraduate student in 2010, in which I currently remain, navigating U.S. immigration systems and society for the last 12 years, with no family nearby. Given that I belong to no one place fully, I have been considered an immigrant no matter where I go. As someone who practices her faiths through a lens of equality, I see unity in all spiritual movements and traditions. Even so, I can identify when some of the Eastern-origin practices I do are being colonized and misappropriated in the West (e.g., yoga, meditation traditions being stripped of source contexts) and especially in the field of psychology. Some of my values include: anticolonialism, directly engaging around issues to promote equity and harmony in the United States and abroad, self-care and acceptance, and a commitment to self-betterment in service of others.

[Disclaimer: The views we represent in this Q&A do not speak for all international students. We each have our unique experiences that we hope to share in this article, to better support different types of international students in the U.S. context.]
What are important issues that you want readers to know about advocating for the international student community?

Diksha: International students often have multiple intersecting identities, and are usually not socialized to U.S. norms, though white supremacy beliefs may often be ubiquitous abroad as well. As we work to support international students, it is important to understand their immigration stories, their unique circumstances, their communication styles and values, the barriers they may face within U.S. immigration systems, and ways to help socialize them into resisting oppression. A decolonial approach to supporting international students from within the United States must begin with the understanding that many international students of color come from countries that, often, have in some way been touched by colonialism and white supremacy. Supporting international students effectively requires us to engage in decolonial reflection ourselves, learn not to pathologize different ways of being that may not be American or familiar, and engage in student-centered practice.

Supporting international students also requires staff and faculty to become familiar with policies that international students may run into (e.g., by consulting with and learning from the international student office). If staff and faculty become knowledgeable about their university’s and country’s policies towards international students, practical experiences, etc., students then do not need to do all the labor of learning complex policies and potentially even correcting their programs if they break policy. Setting international students up for success requires learning a little about U.S. immigration policy and rules for international students. In this way, they don’t have to “go it alone” as they navigate the school psychology profession in a different country with complex immigration rules.

Lamia: In addition to long-term acculturative stress, relocating to another country presents many immediate challenges related to housing, transportation, and legal, medical, and tax documentation. These challenges are often dynamic and shaped by the sociopolitical climate within the United States and its international relations with students’ home countries. International students are not only navigating a new higher education system, they are also learning to nurture and sustain social support within a culture that is often unfamiliar. These challenges can seem overwhelming and may impact help-seeking behaviors.

How can international students maintain and develop their personal and professional identities as they transition to living in the United States?

Lamia: An awareness of one’s own intersecting identities and how they influence personal and professional decisions can help us identify our own privileges and vulnerabilities, as well as our biases and prejudices. I would encourage international students to engage in self-reflection and utilize community spaces that can help shape, strengthen, and nurture these identities.

Diksha: The only thing I would add to Lamia’s point is: Try to have an understanding of who you are and what you want, outside of the U.S. context. Maintain your sense of self and belonging as it ties to your home country and traditions, and have pride in those, insofar as possible. This cultural pride and sense of belonging to your source communities will help sustain you as you transition to living here and dealing with new circumstances and, in some cases, dealing with anti-immigrant sentiment or lack of understanding from others. Also, find your communities within the United States—immigrants with similar circumstances who could help you find your way, whether they be in an online community, through a nearby house of worship, or more.
What are some helpful resources for international graduate students?

Lamia: On-campus resources, particularly the program director and faculty, as well as the university’s international student office can be extremely helpful in navigating the logistical and social challenges related to relocation. I felt extremely supported by my program, my advisor, my student mentor, and the international student office who took proactive efforts in learning about my needs and advocating for me. I also encourage international students to reach out to faculty and peers in other programs and universities during professional development events such as the NASP convention or through memberships in professional associations such as the International School Psychology Association (ISPA).

Diksha: I agree with Lamia’s responses; I would also add that the internet and online forums can be useful sources of information regarding policies for employment and how to navigate them, as well as other issues fellow international students or immigrants may be facing. Relatedly, the NASP Communities platform may be another way to find fellow international students, or even practicing school psychologists or faculty members, who may be able to mentor you. Having a mentor or peer who has experienced the challenges of being an international student can be invaluable.

What tips would you offer fellow international/first generation immigrant graduate students of color and those who support them?

Lamia: The challenges we face are often rooted in transnational systems of oppression and marginalization. As we advocate for ourselves, and uphold our principles and values, it is important to find moments of rest; to breathe, reconnect with our roots and intent, and choose the pace at which we want to move. As Audre Lorde says, “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation.” Although it may seem difficult to experience joy when we realize the challenges that lay ahead of us, pause to celebrate who you are and who you are becoming. Find your community, whatever that looks like, and nurture it. To our peers, faculty, and trainers, reach out to international students and ask them what they need; your words of validation and actions of advocacy can make a significant difference!

Diksha: When we enter the US context, people of color will often be racialized, if we were not before—we become visibly minoritized members of society by our immigrant and racial/ethnic status, our different customs, and maybe especially so given the current sociopolitical climate. You may experience new and familiar forms of oppression—and, of course, new and familiar forms of joy, too!

I recommend that students and faculty use the radical healing model (French et al., 2020) to help international students resist oppression, as and when it arises. This model suggests that, to help buffer against oppression, BIPOC folx should celebrate and uphold our own cultures, seek and make time for emotional and social support, nurture hope, strengthen our critical consciousness to identify and challenge sources of oppression in our lives, and, finally, remember our ability to engage in strength and resistance to oppression. In colloquial language: Find joy in your culture and live it, find your people and take care of yourself, remember to have hope and celebrate your strength, and be willing to identify and resist oppressive dynamics, as acknowledging them may be the first step to taking away some of their power.

Reference