

The Mental Health of International Graduate Students @ Rollins: An Assessment of Needs, Experiences and Use of Services

Joanne A. McGriff, MD, MPH, JM
Rollins School of Public Health

Background & Purpose

- At the Rollins School of Public Health (Rollins), international students make up over 20% of the graduate student population.
- Several studies document the link between the pressures and demands of graduate study and adverse graduate student mental health [1,4].
- International students bear with additional challenges unique to their status. For example, international students have to manage social isolation; language barriers; adaptation to a new environment and culture; financial struggles; differential treatment by faculty or peers; and academic concerns that place them at a higher risk for developing mental disorders [1,2,5]
- Despite these multiple stressors, international students have one of the lowest campus counseling service utilization rates – with one study showing a utilization rate of 2% [1,5].

Study Aims

The aim of this project is to assess the mental health needs, resource awareness, and use of mental health services among Rollins international students using a quantitative survey.

Methods

Based on the National College Health Assessment survey, several psychological scales (e.g., Perceived Stress Scale and Flourishing Scale) and input from current international students, a questionnaire was developed to collect demographic data, specific psychosocial measures and knowledge of mental health resources.

Example questions include:

- In the last month, how often have you felt restless or fidgety?
- In the last month, how often have you felt sad nothing could cheer you up?
- In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems?
- How aware are you of the following resources...Emory University Student Health Services – Psychiatry or Emory University Student Case Management and Intervention Services...(14 services listed)
- Have you used any of the following resources in the past one year...Emory University Student Health Services – Psychiatry or Emory University Student Case Management and Intervention Services...(14 services listed)

In addition, the questionnaire includes questions regarding conceptualization of mental health, stressors and emotional wellbeing, and the impact of culture on mental health experiences and help seeking behaviors.

Examples questions include:

- How is mental health defined within your family/community in your home country?
- Are you able to talk to your friends and family about your mental health?
- What are some cultural factors that impact your ability to seek mental health services or programs?
- Would you attend an educational session on mental health for international students?

Methods (cont'd)

- Eligible participants will be international students at Rollins with an F-1 or J-1 visa enrolled in either a masters or doctoral program.
- Recruitment strategies will include posting flyers, advertising in department newsletters and social media platforms and engagement with relevant student groups (Rollins International Students Association, etc.).
- The survey will be deployed mid-semester in the fall and will remain open for 15 days.

Expectations

According to the 2021 student profile for Rollins, the average student age is 25 with 81% of the student population being female and 26% as international students.

Rollins currently offers master's, doctoral and dual degree programs. Students are enrolled in one of six department programs and have the opportunity to choose from eleven certificate options.

Hypotheses:

- 1) Given the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and US policies impacting international students, it is expected that the survey will show high levels of stress on the Perceived Stress Scale. These findings may have implications for mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety.
- 2) The literature shows that most campus mental health programs focus on undergraduate students. We expect to see low levels of knowledge of mental health and wellbeing resources among international students.
- 3) Given previous research on international students, it is expected that there will be low levels of mental health service utilization among survey participants (less than 10%)

Conclusion

There are many gaps in the literature regarding the mental health and wellbeing of graduate students, especially graduate students of color.

This study presents an opportunity to understand the mental health needs of this unique student group and their knowledge and use of mental health/psychological services.

The results of this study will also inform ongoing work to train student service professionals in engaging with international students around mental health and wellbeing.

References

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