

Discrimination and Harassment Among International Students A Focus Group Study

Report

Purpose

In an effort to learn more about the types of experiences international students have at North Carolina State University, the Office for Equal Opportunity and the Office for International Scholar and Student Services collaborated on a study involving the use of focus groups. The main purpose of the focus groups was to gather information about international students' understanding of and experience with discrimination and harassment.

Format

Two focus groups were held in the E.S. King Village Community Room on Monday, February 18, 2002 and Monday, February 25, 2002; both were scheduled from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. Kyla Sawyer, a graduate assistant in the Office for Equal Opportunity and the resident director for E.S. King Village, assisted with the recruitment of focus group participants. Hanya Redwan, Assistant Director of the Office for International Scholar and Student Services, assisted with recruitment as well. Participation in the focus groups was voluntary and anonymous. The Office for Diversity and African American Affairs provided funding for NCSU Bookstore gift certificates; these gift certificates were distributed to the focus group participants in appreciation for their participation. The Office for Equal Opportunity recognizes and appreciates the support of the Office for Diversity and African-American Affairs and the Office for International Scholar Student Services with this endeavor.

The first focus group, held on February 18th, had seven participants, and the second focus group, held on February 25th, had eleven participants. A total of eighteen international students participated in this study. Open-ended questions were asked, and tapes were made of the participants' responses. Rogers Word Service both taped the focus group dialogues and transcribed the tapes. The transcripts from the two groups are attached to this report. Dr. Rhonda Sutton, Coordinator of Harassment Prevention Programs, Office for Equal Opportunity, facilitated both focus groups. Kyla Sawyer was the note-taker at each group.

Students who participated in the first group, which was held on February 18, 2002, were from Thailand, China, Taiwan, India, Argentina, and Sri Lanka. Students who participated in the second group, which was held on February 25, 2002, were from Jordan, Ivory Coast, Taiwan, Kenya, China, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, India, and Iran.

Findings

The questions that were asked during the course of the focus groups are attached. For the purposes of this report, we have separated the questions into topics and have identified the themes from the students' responses that correspond with each of these topics.

Perceptions and Information Regarding the Laws and Protected Classes

Theme 1: Discrimination

The underlying theme regarding discrimination was the concept that discrimination involved different treatment. Many of the focus group participants described discrimination as something that involves different treatment based on a characteristic such as color or gender or being “foreign”. Discrimination was also described as "biased treatment" and having different standards for different people. One participant shared that her roommate was often treated differently because the roommate had a foreign-sounding name and this focus group participant, who was from the same country as the roommate, was treated more favorably. There was some association between discrimination and job constraints although one student stated that the United States could not "make room for the rest of the world to come [to the U.S.]". From the responses received, it appeared that the focus group participants had a general understanding of discrimination but it seemed that the participants could benefit from education regarding a clearer definition of discrimination and how American laws cover discrimination.

Theme 2: Harassment

The overall theme of harassment was confusion about how to define harassment and the types of behaviors that constitute harassment. The majority of participants from the first focus group could not define or describe harassment. The second group, however, described harassment as something that happens that causes either physical or mental discomfort. Harassment was also viewed as an attack that was unwarranted. Participants in the second group stated that their countries dealt with issues related to harassment and discrimination whereas the participants in the first focus group did not relay this. A number of the focus group participants felt they or another international student they knew had experienced either harassment or discrimination.

Theme 3: National Origin

Overall, there were three themes gathered from the focus group participants' responses. One was the understanding that national origin referred to their country and where they were born. Another theme was that not all Americans are familiar with the wide variety of national origins and ethnicities that exist. A third theme was that international students may experience some differential treatment due to stereotypes or prejudices Americans may have about their national origin. Some of the participants noticed that Americans were, at times, mistaken about an international student's national origin or ethnicity. One example was that of a man from Sri Lanka who had found that many people thought he was Hispanic or [eastern] Indian. Others defined national origin as "nationality" and what a person's "color" is. A couple of participants discussed how different professors had either overtly or covertly pointed out that the [international] students were from a different place. Other participants shared that some Americans had certain ideas and assumptions about issues or conditions their country, such as prostitution in Thailand, but did not know the positive things about the particular country. Participants blamed the media for perpetuating stereotypes. It appears that the focus group participants had a clear understanding of national origin.

Theme 4: Race

One theme that emerged from the focus group participants' responses regarding race was puzzlement about how to define race but an understanding that race was a big issue in American society. Another theme was the difficulty with identifying with a particular race. Race was more difficult for the participants to define or understand. Some of the participants referred to race as their "ethnic origin" or "ethnic background" whereas others referred to race as "color." Some of the participants also shared that race was a much bigger problem in America than it was in their country. Many of the participants shared that it was difficult for them to decide which box to check on forms because none of the boxes applied to them and they did not feel any of the choices described what they perceived as their "race".

Theme 5: Religion

The themes associated with religion were an understanding that religion for the focus group participants is often different from what is practiced in American society, and the understanding that some Americans have strong stereotypes and prejudices about different religions they associate with different countries or national origins. One focus group participant disclosed that some Americans have assumed she was one religion [Hindu] because of where she was from [India] when she is actually a Buddhist. Other participants stated that they did not mind others asking questions about their religion because they viewed this as a way to gain understanding about differences among religions. Some of the participants felt religion was a very private issue and this was an important reason not to ask about it. One participant discussed having a friend who was asked, while walking to his home, "where is Bin Laden?". Another participant reported some people referring to him as Bin Laden. A participant shared that she knew of a student who had been directly asked by a professor if the student was a Christian; the student had asked the professor for a recommendation. Although the student was not a Christian, the professor still wrote the recommendation, according to the focus group participant. Religion seemed self-explanatory to the participants. It appeared that most of the focus group participants were open to discussing their religious differences if others wanted to talk about these differences in a respectful way; however, the focus group participants shared some apprehension and discomfort when dealing with Americans who have stereotypes about their religion.

Theme 6: Disability

The theme regarding disability was that participants were familiar with some of the unlawful issues associated with disability because their countries do have laws and services for people who are disabled, but these laws and services are not as broad or supportive as those in U.S. society. According to some of the focus group participants, there are laws in their countries for people with disabilities as well as special schools and institutions. However, the participants said that these laws do not implement resources and opportunities for people with disabilities like the services and support that are available in the United States. The perception of the participants was that the laws and opportunities for people with disabilities in America are much more advanced than in other countries.

Theme 7: Sexual Harassment

The overall theme related to sexual harassment was that the focus group participants are familiar with this form of harassment because sexual harassment does occur in other countries but victims are not as protected in other countries as victims are in the United States. The focus group participants noted that women experience sexual harassment and sexual assault in their respective countries. Women are often silent if they experience harassment or assault, and blaming the victim in these situations often occurs. Some participants stated that their countries have laws to address sexual harassment, but these laws are often not enforced; this leads to low reporting rates of these incidents. Women do not get fair treatment if they experience sexual harassment and try to report it. Some countries treat cases that involve a grown up and a child very seriously but if an incident occurs between a man and a woman within marriageable age, this is taken as a natural occurrence. Also, some participants shared that issues surrounding sex are often taboo and are therefore not often discussed in their cultures. One participant felt that in America, if he just said "hi" to a woman then she could claim sexual harassment. It was apparent that more education needs to be done for international students regarding sexual harassment.

Additional Perceptions and Experiences Among International Students

Theme 8: Gender Roles in American Society and Other Societies

The underlying theme related to gender roles was that men and women (in the other countries that were represented by the focus group participants) tend to have more rigid gender roles than in the United States. Gender role differences between the U.S. and other countries were noted. For example, one focus group participant thought American men were helpful with housework whereas men in her Middle Eastern culture were not interested in the "affairs of the house". This participant also saw men in her society as having more authority and control than the women in her society have. A Chinese focus group participant saw American couples as being more individualistic whereas a Chinese husband and wife "put their money together". Another participant thought paying for dates was a shared responsibility in America and referred to it as "American share." Other participants viewed American women as more independent and individualized. Divorce was viewed as shameful in some of the participants' countries but the participants did not think divorce was seen as shameful in America. There was discussion about traditional gender roles in countries and oppression of women. Another participant discussed how American men were more aware of the consequences of their actions whereas the males in her culture were "a little bit outrageous" and more likely to act out; this participant shared that there were not consequences for these men because women will not speak out or the men will have a strong defense. One participant was not able to delineate a clear distinction between the way American men and American women dress because he saw both genders wearing earrings and long hair; this caused him some discomfort when he had to entrust the care of his children to a man that wore an earring.

Theme 9: Post-September 11th Experiences

The overall theme regarding the aftermath of September 11th was that some of the focus group participants had felt uncomfortable and had felt tension on campus; some even knew of international students who had suffered prejudice due to the September 11th attack. However, the majority of focus group participants felt those tensions had eased due to educational efforts by NC State University. A participant shared that a Muslim student friend had problems with a PE instructor about the number of absences she had from the PE class; the student was afraid to come on campus after September 11th because she wears a veil. The student finally quit the class. This same Muslim student had another negative experience in a class where the professor spoke negatively of Muslims after the September 11th attack; the student stopped going to this class as well. According to the focus group participant who reported these incidents involving the female Muslim student, the student was doing well and had support from her advisor. Another participant shared that she felt she was getting a whole lot of stares after September 11th due to the color of her skin but she was not experiencing this any more. Another participant reported hearing of a Muslim female student who was spit on by a man while she was outside studying for an exam; it was reported that the female student missed her test, which was scheduled for later that same day, because she was so disturbed by the incident. Participants shared that they felt the awareness speeches on campus had helped ease the tension. Participants also felt that other educational opportunities that had taken place through different speakers, the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, and different classes had helped to open people's minds. One participant thought Americans were trying to understand why people outside of the U.S. hate them and that September 11th had "open[ed] the Americans' eyes." Another participant felt that international students needed to break stereotypes Americans have and understand what [Americans] really think. Another participant shared that he thought Americans tolerated certain issues more than people from his country do; he thought America was generous to all people of the world and, therefore, internationals needed to be generous, too.

Theme 10: How Americans, American Students and American Faculty Perceive International Students

The overall theme regarding how Americans, American students and American faculty perceive international students was "it varies." However, another theme gathered from the focus group participants' responses was that international students are taken advantage of by faculty in some situations.

Americans

One participant shared that he thought Americans had an open attitude to "foreigners." This same participant shared that he understood he was the visitor in America and he understood constraints on international students such as those related to working. This participant said that, "[America] cannot make room for the rest of the world to come here."

American Students

Participants reported different treatment from different American students. Some American students have been friendly, some have not spoken to the international students, and after September 11th some of the international students felt uncomfortable around American students. Some have found American students to ask inquisitive but respectful questions about different dress or religions whereas other American students have not been as kind in their comments. Many of the international students have found they are the majority in their [graduate] classes and wondered if the American students felt like the minority. Some of the international students have noticed that a lot of the teaching assistants are international students and the undergraduate students treated these TAs very well because the undergraduates needed help from the TAs. Many of the focus group participants had not had a lot of interaction with American students.

American Faculty

Focus group participants had varying experiences with American faculty as well. Some participants found a lot of diversity among their professors and had positive, supportive interactions. Some participants felt the faculty were very committed to having international students in their respective programs. Others had experiences where they felt faculty members had singled out the international students in class based on their nationality. Some of the participants felt that budget cuts were causing problems with funding for international students and this, in turn, impacted the attitude faculty had towards international students. Many of the focus group participants mentioned faculty taking advantage of them as research and graduate students and perceived inequity in regard to the work load they were assigned as teaching assistants, graduate assistants, or research assistants.

The overwhelming majority of students who participated in the focus groups were graduate students, and some of them thought that undergraduate international students might have different experiences with American students due to the large number of graduate students on campus that were international students.

Theme 11: Form(s) of harassment or discrimination an International Student May Face at NC State University

The overall theme was that the focus group participants had experienced harassment in both overt and covert forms and in ways where they felt treated differently from American students. Some participants discussed how they or other international students they knew had been treated differently in class or by campus police because of their ethnicity. Other participants verbalized problems with University Housing not taking into account that international students cannot simply go home for a break, or pay for a hotel room, or stay with someone off campus when the residence halls are "closed". Other participants said that the university should not treat international students like American students because the administration does not seem to understand that international students do not have the same type of flexibility as American students. A participant who was a TA had more students assigned and worked more hours than an American student - for the same pay. This participant felt less able to complain because he needed to earn the money and could not simply go out and find another job; he felt "tied to the system."

Suggestions/Concerns from International Students

Some of the participants offered the following suggestions during the focus group discussions:

- Have link from the OISSS home page to the OEO page.
- Make housing available for international students over the breaks or, if the University is not able to do so, provide physical assistance with moving to other residence hall locations.
- Have even loads of undergraduate students and office hours for all TAs.
- Insurance for international students does not have adequate coverage and is too expensive or has long waiting periods for coverage; this needs to be improved.
- International students are against a tuition increase; they perceive tuition as very high and believe they could possibly choose a better school than NC State University. In addition, international students often do not get to sign up for the classes they want, and they feel they should be able to get these classes due to the high tuition they pay.
- International students need to be better informed about the university's funding issues, policies, and procedures.

Conclusion

The focus group discussions revealed that international students do experience forms of harassment and discrimination. Some are blatant, such as having TAs who are international students assigned to more students and therefore required to work more hours than other TAs. There was also the situation where an American student spit upon a Muslim student not long after the September 11th attacks. Some forms of discrimination and harassment may seem less overt, such as policies that do not take into account the special needs of international students or the indirect comments some international students receive in class from professors. It appeared that most of the harassment and discrimination that was reported by the focus group participants was based on national origin or religion.

It was also clear that harassment and discrimination are handled in different ways in other countries; therefore, more education for international students is needed to inform them of their rights and responsibilities as outlined by federal and state laws and university policies. In addition, international students may not have a clear understanding of "race" as defined by law or of what constitutes harassment.

There are limitations to this research project. Only graduate international students participated in the focus groups, and the majority of students were from the Middle Eastern, Asian and African parts of the world. Therefore, care should be taken to generalize the results of this research to all international students at NC State University.

The information gathered has provided insight into the understanding international students have about harassment and discrimination, and this information will help the Coordinator of Harassment Prevention Programs augment her educational programming for audiences that include international students.