

Educators Suggest 'Mental-Health First Aid' for International Students

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The risk factors for mental illness or mental-health issues are higher for international students and students who are studying abroad, so universities and colleges should consider setting up "mental-health first-aid programs" that can recognize and deal with problems before they become full-blown crises, several international-education officials said here on Monday.

Mental-health first aid works on the same principle as first aid for physical-health situations, said the officials, who spoke on a panel during the annual conference of the Canadian Bureau for International Education.

And people trained to provide that first aid do not have to be mental-health professionals, the speakers said.

"Just as taking a first-aid course doesn't make you a doctor, taking a mental-health first-aid course doesn't make you a counselor but does give you the ability to deal with an immediate crisis," said one of the presenters, Lynne A. Mitchell, who is director of international programs at the University of Guelph, in Ontario. Ms. Mitchell recently completed such a course.

With forecasts of greater numbers of international students coming to campuses, and more domestic students participating in study-abroad programs, universities need to make sure they have resources for dealing with those students' problems, according to the session's moderator, Wayne Myles, director of international students at Queen's University, in Kingston, Ontario. "Having high-quality support services in place is one of the ways to manage the risk," he said.

Students who are miles from home and in a different culture are particularly vulnerable to stress. "Sustained loneliness is a risk factor for mental illness," said another panel member, Michael Condra, who is director of counseling services at Queen's.

Questions and comments from the floor underlined the message that mental-health issues are a growing concern. Representatives of international-student offices said they worried about depression, suicide risk, and psychotic incidents among the students they oversee. Sometimes it is a problem to get international students whose culture does not include counseling to see a mental-health provider. One suggestion was to have a counselor attached to the international office, where foreign students already feel comfortable.

Several international-student advisers said confidentiality was an important issue for students, but members of the panel warned that when someone talks about suicide, for example, the information can no longer remain private.

The conference continues through Wednesday.

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