A Qualitative Systematic Review of Relationship and Sexual Violence Among International College Students: Barriers to Reporting and Trauma-Informed Prevention Strategies and Response

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Background

Approximately 1 million international students study in the United States, comprising almost 5% of the country’s students in higher education (Postel, 2020). Despite being a diverse group, however, the catch-all phrase “international student” is often incorrectly seen as a monolith (Hutcheson, 2020); it is necessary to consider how intersecting identities of race, gender, culture, socioeconomic status, and dis/ability impact their wellbeing and health on college campuses.

One particularly understudied area is how international students experience gender- and power-based violence. Research in violence prevention has previously disproportionately considered domestic students and equated those findings for the entirety of the student body. However, as the number of international students in the United States continues to increase, there exists a need to understand and respond to the unique set of circumstances this student population experiences.

Experiences with sexual violence can result in health problems, such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as delays in or terminations of students’ academic careers (Krebs et al., 2016). Healthcare entities in higher education can mitigate the harmful effects of sexual violence and provide support for international students by implementing and adopting trauma-informed care framework.

Trauma-informed care seeks to:

- Realize trauma’s widespread impacts & understand paths for recovery;
- Recognize signs & symptoms of trauma in patients, families, and staff;
- Integrate knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices; and
- Actively avoid re-traumatization

What is known in the literature about international students’ experiences with gender- and power-based violence?

What trauma-informed prevention strategies and responses can universities adapt to improve the health of international students?

Methodology

International students’ experiences with gender and power-based violence were identified through professional research journals and web-based sources. The inclusion criteria for articles were peer-reviewed publications between 2016 & 2022 written in English. Keywords used were “sexual assault, college”, and “international students”. The 12 articles chosen were characterized by studies in English-speaking Western countries (e.g., America, Canada, Australia).

The findings of the literature review were categorized into different levels of the socioecological model in order to consider the complex interrelatedness between individual, relationships, organizations, communities, policies, and the society at large.

In the qualitative systemic review, the reviewers categorized findings into different levels of the socioecological model in order to consider the complex interrelatedness between individual, relationships, organizations, communities, policies, and the society at large.

Conclusions

- This qualitative systemic review begins to identify areas of improvement on college campuses to better support international students with experiences of sexual violence.
- Initial review showed that international students lacked awareness of consent and what constitutes an offense, given their unfamiliarity with sexual norms in the United States. Additionally, there are additional barriers to supportive services, such as having misconceptions about reporting, having to navigate intra-campus dynamics, and facing culture-specific pressures to perform well academically.
- To improve international students’ knowledge on consent and sexual misconduct, we recommend colleges to create population-specific prevention trainings and diversify international students’ social circles by providing peer mentorship opportunities.
- To improve access to supportive services, we recommend colleges to review and clarify the reduced course load policies, communicate as clearly as possible, and train staff on trauma-informed care.
- As a next step, more studies on experiences of international student survivors are needed. At USC, we will work on implementing the recommendations and assess their effectiveness.

References