

2014 Convention Program Summaries

For those of you who either couldn't make it to the annual convention or attend every workshop we asked presenters to share summaries of their programs in the newsletter.

Thank you to those of you who allowed us to include these in our newsletter!



TCKs: The Largest Group of Un-Served Students Hidden Among Us?

Presentation by: David Stuebing

This presentation was intended to bring attention to a group of students who generally fly under the radar at most colleges and universities. As the title suggests, these students tend to blend in with the larger student population and, as a result, often walk our campuses without faculty and staff having the necessary awareness to identify and assist them in their unique transitions and experiences.

To begin with the accepted definition, "a Third Culture Kid (TCK) is a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents' culture. The TCK frequently builds relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any. Although elements from each culture may be assimilated into the TCK's life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar background." (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001)

TCKs on your campus may come from military families, families involved in international business, politics, governmental work, humanitarian or religious work or even professional athletics. The simple reality is that as our world shrinks, more and more young people are growing up in international, multicultural and often transient home experiences that leave a distinct mark on their development. With an estimated 6.3 million Americans living abroad (aaro.org), not including people of other nationalities residing outside their country of citizenship, the potential numbers of TCKs in college is significant. Since tracking TCKs is difficult at best, I speculate that this group is among the largest due to the aforementioned factors as well as my own observations from the initial tracking data from Washington College where I work in residence life, which has thus far shown that 4 - 4.5% of incoming students over the past few years have lived outside their passport country for at least 5 years. If, and I stress that this is a very large if, this statistic carries across 4 year institutions in the US in general, it would suggest as many as 500,000 TCKs in college in the US today. That number may be higher taking into account that for some, less than 5 years living abroad may have a significant impact on their developmental experience.

It is important that college and university personnel be aware of several common aspects of TCKs.

- 1) TCKs are high achieving, often coming from well-educated families. In 1993 they were been found to be 4 times more likely to attend college than the typical American young adult and 8 times more likely to attend graduate school (Cottrell & Useem, 1993).

However, 45% attended 3 or more colleges or universities before attaining a degree, speaking to significant issues of retention (Cottrell & Useem, 1994).

- 2) TCKs typically experience “dynamic in-between-ness” (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001), meaning they do not feel fully at home or connected in any one place in the world. The simple question, “where are you from?” that is asked so frequently in college ice breakers and orientations can be an overwhelming question for them, one which they often cease answering truthfully due to the frustration of attempting to explain their life experience to befuddled peers over and over again.
- 3) Due to challenges in connecting and the common experience of having moved multiple times while growing up, many TCKs experience loneliness, unresolved grief (Sheppard & Steele, 2003 and Oesterreich, 2004) and depression (Cottrell & Useem, 1993).
- 4) They also bring significant strengths to campus, but may not be aware of the value of their life experience. They are often understanding and flexible with a wide view of the world and an in-depth appreciation for the complexities of various parts of the world. Their experience prepares them to serve as excellent cultural ambassadors and bridges between local and international students as well as RAs and in other arenas where cultural competence and friendly acceptance are valued.
- 5) Lastly, many TCKs may not even know what a TCK is or that they may be one, so there can be a significant sense of relief to discover that the challenges they face are normal and do not mean they are broken. Similarly, it is often cathartic for them to realize that their life experience is an asset rather than a burden.

Identifying TCKs on our campuses can be a challenge, however, since TCKs tend to adapt quickly to their surroundings, a skill and habit learned through a life of international mobility and transition. While the Common Application has a space for applicants to disclose “# of years spent/lived outside the US”, that data is not always captured by admissions offices who are often concerned with minimizing keystrokes. It is a good place to start, however, although it may also give an incomplete picture as it fails to capture students legally from other parts of the world who have lived largely or exclusively inside the US. Various offices can capture this information in their own way by including questions on intake or housing forms. A helpful way to phrase the question may be “How many years have you lived outside your passport country?” or “How many times did you move prior to attending college?” and “Were any of your moves to different countries?” This information is crucial as it helps us both inform our interactions and allows us to create opportunities for TCKs to meet each other. Recalling that TCKs find their sense of belonging in relationship to others of similar backgrounds as well as their high rate of transferring, our retention rates will likely be aided by smoothing the process by which TCKs can form communities of support and understanding.

Ultimately, as with our other students, we want to allow TCKs to pursue their own path through college, and be their own persons, while we remain available and educated so as to provide helpful services when needed or appropriate.

If you wish to discuss TCKs further or would like more information, please feel free to contact me at david.stuebing@gmail.com

Sources:

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