

# Enhancing the Visibility of Mental Health Concerns and Suicide Risk Among International Students

Megan E. Funston, M.A.  
Carnegie Mellon University  
Counseling & Psychological Services

# Learning Objectives

- (1) Gain in-depth understanding of unique challenges many international students face when attending universities and colleges away from their country of origin
- (2) Expand awareness of mental health concerns among the international student population, including factors that may place students at higher risk for experiencing suicidal ideation and/or engaging in self-harm behaviors
- (3) Increase knowledge of protective factors for international students and ways in which administrators, staff, and faculty members of higher education institutions can work to support international students

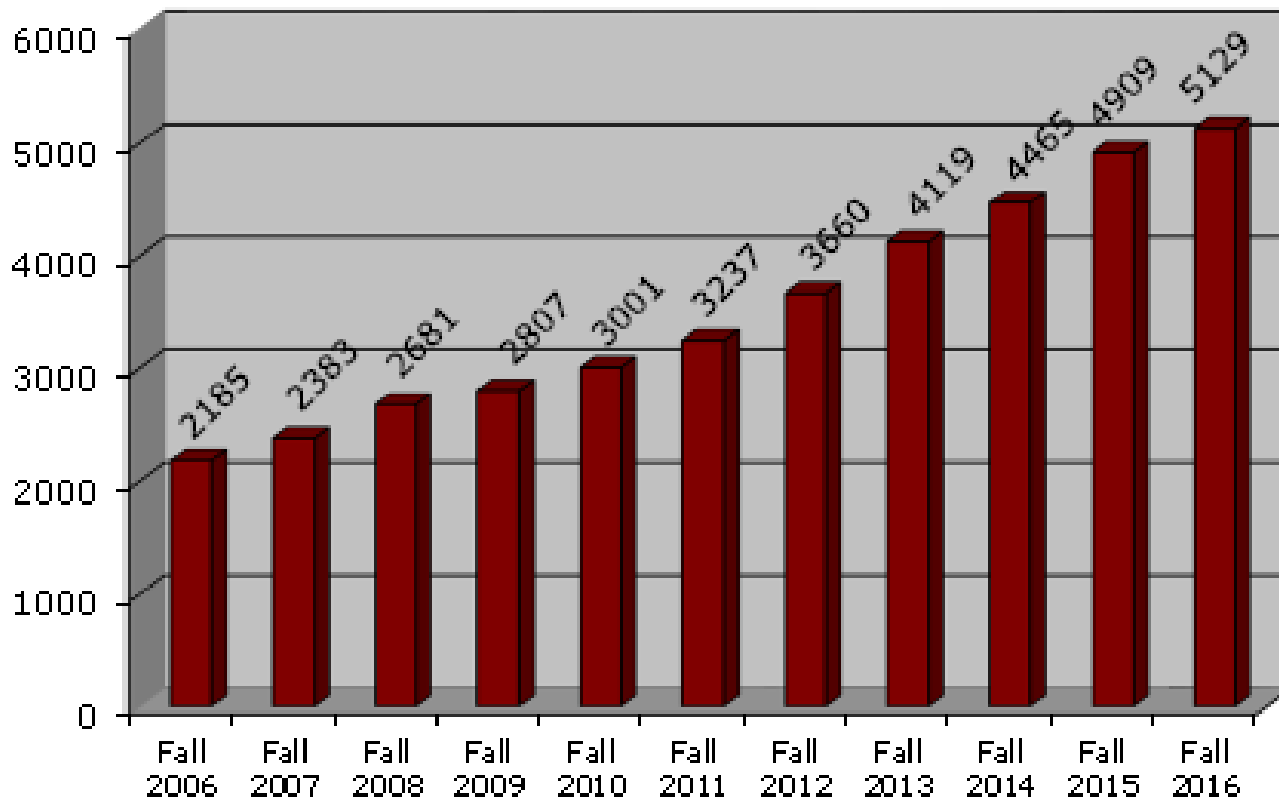
# Suicide Risk Among College Students

- \* Suicide is the leading cause of death on college campuses (Schwartz, 2006; Servaty-Seib, Lockman, Shemwell, & Marks, 2015)
- \* Suicidal thoughts, plans, and attempts occur more often in students age 18-25 compared to older students (American Association of Suicidology, 2017)
- \* Among individuals ages 25-34, suicide is the second-leading cause of death (American Association of Suicidology, 2017)
- \* Suicide rates among the college student population are between 0.5 and 7.5 per 100,000 (American Association of Suicidology, 2017)

# International Student Population: On the Rise

- \* International student population in the U.S. continues to increase each year (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016; Mori, 2000; Toprak, Cetin, Guven, Can, & Demircan, 2011)
- \* U.S. has the highest number of international students compared to other host countries (Stephens, Warren, & Hamer, 2015)
- \* For the first time, the number of international students in the U.S. has surpassed 1 million (Witherell, 2016)
- \* Comprise 5% of the total student population at U.S. colleges and universities (Witherell, 2016)

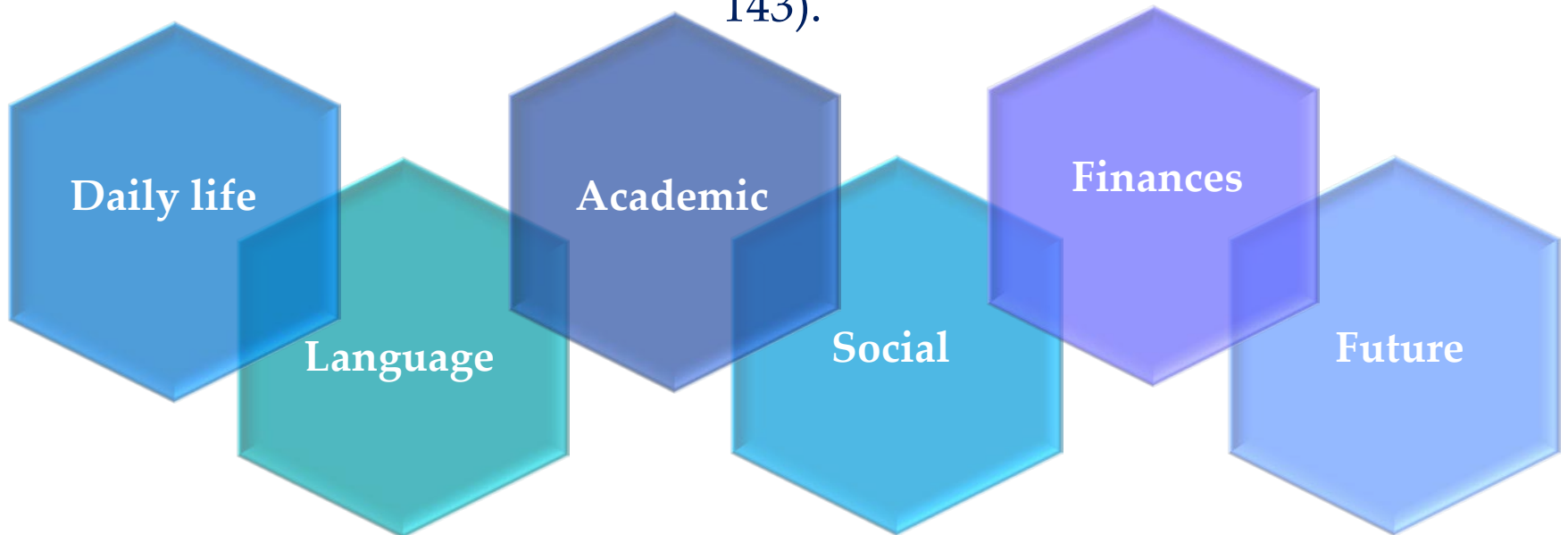
## International Student Growth 2006 - 2016



(Carnegie Mellon University, 2016)

# Unique Challenges

“Despite the constant expansion of the international student population in the U.S., such students have always remained one of the most quiet, invisible, underserved groups on the American campus” (Mori, 2000, p. 143).



# Daily Life

“You expect to have to learn how to do new things overseas and even new ways of doing familiar things, but you may be surprised to discover that you have to learn to do things you normally do without thinking” (Gebhard, 2012, p. 187).

|                          |
|--------------------------|
| Cooking                  |
| Grocery shopping         |
| Transportation           |
| Budgeting                |
| Registering for classes  |
| Navigating relationships |

(Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016; Gebhard, 2012)

# Language

- \* Significant concern for many international students (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016; Gebhard, 2012; Mori, 2000; Onabule & Boes, 2013; Sumer, Poyrazli, & Grahame, 2008)
- \* Heightened risk for adjustment difficulties and mental health concerns (Onabule & Boes, 2013; Sumer, Poyrazli, & Grahame, 2008)
- \* Academic impact (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016; Gebhard, 2012; Mori, 2000)
  - \* Lectures, note taking, completing assignments on time, participating in discussions, expressing oneself during essays, oral presentations, asking questions in class



# Academic

- \* American education system vs. home country education system (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016; Mori, 2000; Onabule & Boes, 2013)

| U.S.  |
|---|
| Frequent assignments, quizzes, exams  |
| Active participation, informal class discussions                                  |
| Professors and teaching assistants accessible                                     |
| Emphasis on synthesizing information and expressing one's own opinion/perspective |

- \* Obligations to immediate family, relatives, friends, government, sponsoring organizations, and universities can be daunting (Mori, 2000)

# Finances

“We have a big problem with the international students working basically too hard and not getting enough sleep...we often get people that are in a state of collapse, they've only slept three or four hours for the last three weeks...they often have to work long hours just to make ends meet” (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016, p. 669).

~

- \* International students often reliant on family for support
- \* Government may sponsor
- \* Work eligibility limited to on-campus, scholarships, and assistantships

(Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016; Mori, 2000)

# Social

- \* Critical for overall well-being (Sumer, Poyrazli, & Grahame, 2008)
- \* Effects of adjustment on mental health buffered by sense of belonging (Cho & Yu, 2015; Sumer, Poyrazli, & Grahame, 2008)
- \* American social relationships and expectations vs. home country (Gebhard, 2012; Mori, 2000)
- \* Surprise, disappointment, and anxiety may occur when trying to develop relationships (Gebhard, 2012)

# Future

Stay, travel elsewhere, or return home?

- \* Complex decision-making process
- \* Political considerations
- \* Navigating new identity
- \* Professional and personal adjustments may feel overwhelming

(Mori, 2000; Yi, Lin, & Kishimoto, 2003)

# Implications of Challenges: Increased Risk

The bottom of the slide features a decorative graphic consisting of several overlapping, wavy lines in shades of white, light blue, and dark purple, creating a sense of movement and depth.

# Mental Health and College Population

- \* Adolescents and emerging adults report higher levels of emotional distress than previous generations (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016)
- \* Suicide rates are shown to decline in areas where suicide prevention has been implemented, whereas rates continue to increase in nations where such programs do not exist (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016)
- \* Interpersonal theory of suicide (Joiner, 2005)
  - \* Thwarted belongingness
  - \* Perceived burdensomeness
  - \* Acquired capability for suicide

# Common Presenting Concerns

- \* Academic/career
- \* Anxiety
- \* Depression
- \* Relationships
- \* Physical health
- \* Grief/loss
- \* Personal crises

(Gebhard, 2012; Hwang, Bennett, & Beauchemin, 2014; Mori, 2000; Onabule & Boes, 2013; Poyrazli, 2015; Servaty-Seib et al., 2015; Sumer, Poyrazli, & Grahame, 2008; Yi, Lin, & Kishimoto, 2003; Yusoff, 2011)

# Barriers to Seeking Services

- \* Utilization of college counseling centers among international students is consistently low (Hwang, Bennett, & Beauchemin, 2014; Mori, 2000; Onabule & Boes, 2013; Poyrazli, 2015)
- \* Despite research showing international students experience psychological distress, only approximately 2% of students seek mental health services (Poyrazli, 2015)
- \* Students more likely to seek services when in crisis (Poyrazli, 2015)



# Protective Factors

The slide features a solid blue background. At the bottom, there are decorative wavy lines in shades of white and maroon, creating a layered, wave-like effect.

# Personal Resources

- \* Capacity to utilize coping skills (Gebhard, 2012)
  - \* Self-soothing
  - \* Seeking support when needed
  - \* Using reminders of home culture
  - \* Praying at preferred religious institution
  - \* Meeting with others of similar backgrounds for meals, holidays, trips
- \* Sense of self-efficacy (Yusoff, 2011)
  - \* Believing in oneself
  - \* Motivation
  - \* Persistence when faced with setbacks
  - \* Emotional adaptation
  - \* Academic goals
  - \* Extracurricular involvement

# Social Support

- \* Primary factor in predicting students' mental health and general level of satisfaction (Cho & Yu, 2015)
- \* One of the most critical components of determining emotional health (Sumer, Poyrazli, & Grahame, 2008)
- \* Lower levels of suicidal ideation associated with social support (Servaty-Seib et al., 2015)
- \* Sense of belonging allows students to feel anchored, even in an unfamiliar environment (Servaty-Seib et al., 2015)

# Organizational/University Support

- \* International students depend heavily on host university
- \* Students begin to build social support system and develop sense of community
- \* The more support felt from one's host university, the more stable and satisfied
- \* Campus belonging can buffer the effects of stress and reduce likelihood of suicide ideation and self-harm
- \* The more positive one's experience with host university, the more likely services will be utilized
- \* Staff, faculty, and administrators are often the first point of contact for disclosures of distress

(Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016; Gebhard, 2012; Hwang, Bennett, & Beauchemin, 2014; Servaty-Seib et al., 2015)

# Administrators, Staff, and Faculty: How to Support International Students

The bottom of the slide features a decorative graphic consisting of several overlapping, wavy lines in shades of white, light blue, and dark blue, creating a sense of movement and depth.

# University Supports: System

- \* Orientation extended beyond start of each semester
- \* Marketing campus resources
  - \* The more visibility, the more likely students will utilize
  - \* Students often learn about resources from friends, peers, health care providers, academic advisors, etc.
- \* Additional program implementation
  - \* Peer pairing
  - \* Host family
  - \* Focus on cultural learning
  - \* Festivals/events recognizing international students

(Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016; Poyrazli, 2015)

# University Supports: Individual

- \* Helping students work through practical concerns
  - \* Housing needs
  - \* Course selection
  - \* Employment
  - \* Finances
  - \* Mentoring
- \* Checking-in with student who presents with academic concerns
  - \* Assessing overall well-being
  - \* Consulting with colleagues, supervisors, counseling center staff
  - \* Speaking candidly, openly, directly if suicidal thoughts and/or self-harm is suspected
  - \* Recognizing one's boundaries/limitations
  - \* Seek training in mental health first aid
- \* Clarity about internal policies for confidentiality
- \* Self-reflection

(Onabule & Boes, 2013; Poyrazli, 2015, Yi, Lin, & Kishimoto, 2003)

# University Supports: Counseling Centers

- \* How to encourage use of counseling centers
  - \* Marketing
    - \* Continued dissemination of information
    - \* Transparency in the services provided
    - \* Utilizing student listservs
    - \* Brochures
    - \* Advertising in campus newspapers
    - \* Conducting needs assessments
  - \* Physical location of counseling center
    - \* Close to campus
    - \* Near other non-psychological services

(Mori, 2000; Poyrazli, 2015)



# University Supports: Counseling Centers

- \* How campus counseling centers can enhance services
  - \* Students more likely to seek services if they understand the services offered, what to expect, and feel their needs could be met
  - \* Outreaching/networking with other campus organizations
  - \* Depression and anxiety screening days
  - \* Offering training to faculty/staff/administrators for how to support students
  - \* Connecting to domestic students
  - \* Psychoeducation and support groups for international students

(Onabule & Boes, 2013; Mori, 2000; Servaty-Seib et al., 2015; Yi, Lin, & Kishimoto, 2003)

Questions?

# References

- \* American Association of Suicidology. (2017, March). *College students and suicide fact sheet*. Retrieved from <http://www.suicidology.org/Portals/14/Re-Formatted%20College%20Students%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf?ver=2016-11-16-110354-547>.
- \* Carnegie Mellon University. (2016, October). *Office of International Education Fall Statistics 2016*. Retrieved from <https://www.cmu.edu/oie/about/stats.html>
- \* Cho, J. & Yu, H. (2015). Roles of university support for international students in the United States: Analysis of a systematic model of university identification, university support, and psychological well-being. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 19*, 11-27. doi: 10.1177/1028315314533606
- \* Drum, D. J., Brownson, C., Burten Denmark, A., & Smith, S.E. (2009). New data on the nature of suicidal crises in college students: Shifting the paradigm. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 40*, 213-222.
- \* Forbes-Mewett, H. & Sawyer, A-M. (2016). International students and mental health. *Journal of International Students, 6*, 661-677.
- \* Gebhard, J. G. (2012). International students' adjustment problems and behaviors. *Journal of International Students, 2*(2), 184-193.
- \* Hwang, B. J., Bennett, R., & Beauchemin, J. (2014). International students' utilization of counseling services. *College Student Journal, 3*, 347-354.
- \* Joiner, T. E. (2005). *Why people die by suicide*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- \* Mori, S. (2000). Addressing the mental health concerns of international students. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 78*, 137-144.
- \* Onabule, A. I., Boes, S. R. (2013). International students' likelihood to seek counseling while studying abroad. *Journal of International Students, 3*, 52-59.
- \* Poyrazli, S. (2015). Psychological symptoms and concerns experiences by international students: Outreach implications for counseling centers. *Journal of International Students, 5*, 306-312.

# References

- \* Schwartz, A. J. (2006). College student suicide in the United States: 1990-1991 through 2003-2004. *Journal of American College Health, 54*, 341-352.
- \* Servaty-Seib, H. L., Lockman, J., Shemwell, D., & Marks, L. R. (2015). International and domestic students perceived burdensomeness, belongingness, and suicidal ideation. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior, 46*, 141-153. doi: 10.1111/sltb.12178
- \* Stephens, M., Warren, L.K., & Hamer, A.L. (2015). *Comparative indicators of education in the United States and other G-20 countries: 2015* (NCES 2016-100). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office
- \* Sumer, S, Poyrazli, S., & Grahame, K. (2008). Predictors of depression and anxiety among international students. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 86*, 429-437
- \* Toprak, S., Cetin, I., Guven, T., Can, G., & Demircan, C. (2011). Self-harm, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts among college students. *Psychiatry Research, 187*, 140-144. doi: 10.1016/j.psychres.2010.09.009
- \* Witherell, S. (2016). *Press release: IIE releases Open Doors 2016 data*. Retrieved from [http://www.iie.org/en/Who-We-Are/News-and-Events/Press-Center/Press-Releases/2016/2016-11-14-Open-Doors-Data#.WLMHLX\\_GpQM](http://www.iie.org/en/Who-We-Are/News-and-Events/Press-Center/Press-Releases/2016/2016-11-14-Open-Doors-Data#.WLMHLX_GpQM)
- \* Yi, J. K., Lin, J-C.G., & Kishimoto, Y. (2003). Utilization of counseling services by international students. *Journal of Instructional Psychology, 30*(4).
- \* Yusoff, Y. M. (2011). International students' adjustment in higher education: Relation between social support, self-efficacy, and socio-cultural adjustment. *Australian Journal of Business and Management Research, 1*(1), 1-15.