

An International Perspective - Transcript

Produced by: Caitlyn Cordes, Nathan Hartzell, Jeremy Odrich & Sebastian Oliver

Host: Think back to your first day of class at the University of Virginia. More likely than not, you'll remember the nerves and uncertainty that filled you as you walked to your first lecture. Passing through the lawn you saw hundreds of unfamiliar faces as the bells from the Chapel rang across grounds. All of these feelings are normal for first-years at UVA. But imagine for a moment that you were facing all of these same challenges while being over a thousand miles and a 20 hour flight from home. The food, language, and people are all different from your home country. This is the college experience for the over 2,000 international students at the University of Virginia.

[Series Introduction/Theme song plays: "Deep End" by Makaih Beats]

Host: "Welcome to "U Ok UVA?," a student-produced podcast about mental health and wellness at the University of Virginia. I am your host, Jeremy Odrich, and in this episode we will be focusing on the mental health of international students at UVA. We'll speak with international students from across the globe in order to understand how mental health factors into their college experience.

Opening

Host: For many international students, there is a gap between how mental health is discussed at UVA as compared to their home countries.

Andre, an international student from Singapore, found that the conversation around mental health at his high school tended to look down upon those who needed counseling or therapy. Because of the lack of discussion socially, around mental health, Andre explained that going to the school counselor wasn't a common occurrence.

Student Interviewee 1: "It was kind of more anxiety driving by going, by letting them know you have a problem."

Host: Along with that, therapy in general was not very widely used

Student Interviewee 1: "I think mental health in my social life and school back then, therapy wasn't normalized, or seeking help for mental health was not normalized unless it was a very severe case."

Host: Even in his home with his family, Andre found that mental health was not acknowledged as a serious issue.

Student Interviewee 1: "Yeah culturally also, I think it is part of Asian culture as well, not to air your laundry to others."

Host: When Andre arrived at UVA, he found that the open conversation around mental health was surprising, and very different from back home.

Despite the openness that Andre experienced upon arrival at UVA, both at home and at school back in Singapore, he was raised in a culture that minimized mental health. Unfortunately, Andre's upbringing was not unique in this regard. Peruvian fourth year student Sebastian Cadillo echoed what Andre had to say. When asked about the societal conversation around mental health in Peru, he said.

Student Interviewee 2: "I honestly wouldn't say so, I don't think it was talked a lot about in my high school or in Peru as a whole. Peru is a very kind of like, you could say traditional country."

Host: All the international students I talked with mentioned that mental health is not something that is openly discussed in their home countries. This is important because UVA is a very rigorous academic institution which can put immense pressure on students. When international students come to UVA, they are faced with all of the typical challenges brought by the first year of college, yet many have no familiarity with navigating mental health issues. Remember that these students are far from their homes and their support systems. As a result, these international students are placed into a difficult environment and often do not know how to navigate mental health issues as they arise. While many students did not feel comfortable directly discussing the details of their personal mental health struggles, they did feel comfortable discussing the factors that played into them. Students tended to highlight many different components that contributed to mental health struggles such as: distance from family, language barriers as arose in the classroom, and cultural barriers that arose in social situations.

[Music plays: "Groovy Synth Fuzzy Ting" by Joseph McDade]

Mental health struggles of missing home

Host: One particularly salient barrier to assimilation at UVA is being far from home and family. Every student I spoke to highlighted the difficulty of missing their homes, friends, and families— to a seemingly more extreme degree than the typical first year. Of the international students I had the chance to speak with, most only got to see their families a couple times per year at the maximum.

Student Interviewee 1: "Maybe I have gone back four times to see them, and they have come here once to see me."

Student Interviewee 3: "I think the biggest struggle was definitely staying away from my family because I have never lived for such a long period of time away from them. Especially my grandma, she is basically a second mom, I grew up being very close with her. Staying like 5 months away from them for the first time, it kind of hit me like wow, this is really happening."

Student Interviewee 2: "I definitely felt kind of homesick at first when I came to the U.S., the

culture here is just different. It was hard to get to know people as easily as Americans would get to know other Americans.”

Host: These feelings of homesickness often bled into feelings of isolation and loneliness. And while the students did not feel comfortable explicitly stating the impact of these feelings on their mental health; it is clear how their mental health might have suffered. I want to be careful here not to overgeneralize or paint with too broad a brush but what is important is seeing how the realities of being an international student can easily lead to mental health struggles.

Andre, who we met earlier, did feel comfortable speaking a little bit about his experience with depression. When discussing his biggest challenges as a first-year, he said the following:

Student Interviewee 1: “I think probably it would be depression. Because I guess, it is very easy to feel lonely when you are half around the world, surrounded by strangers.”

Host: The World Health Organization states that depression can often result from a complex interaction of social, psychological, and biological factors. So people who have gone through adverse life events (such as unemployment, bereavement, traumatic events) are more likely to develop depression. And what this means for international students like Andre is that their severe homesickness has the potential to spiral into worse mental health issues. And as a direct result, international students can also face difficulty in assimilating academically, socially, and professionally to UVA.

Academic struggles in the classroom

Host: One thing that I really wanted to discuss with international students was their experience in classes at UVA. As a top ranked university, UVA is known for its rigor and difficulty. Not only is it hard to get accepted, but it is also hard to succeed once you are here. I wanted to learn more about how being an international student played into this intense academic environment.

It can be hard for non-international students at UVA to understand all of the barriers that international students may face in assimilating. For example, a lot of classes at UVA strongly emphasize in-class participation, often in the form of speaking up and answering questions – something that isn’t always common in other cultures. There is a cultural barrier as well as a language barrier present for international students when participating in class. Students Guili and Andre highlighted how it can feel to be an international student inside the classroom:

Student Interviewee 1: “It was definitely something I thought about a lot. I was definitely really shy to speak up. I was definitely not used to the amount of like conversation that occurred within the class.”

Student Interviewee 4: “I think I most felt it in classes. Like for example, if I was the only

international person in one class. I would feel like oh, like a little like weird speaking because I felt like every time I would speak, everyone would look at me a little more because of like, oh that's an interesting accent.”

Host: Of course these difficulties in acclimating academically also bled into social acclimation issues. Beyond the language barrier for international students, there is the barrier of cultural norms. Knowing how to make friends, join clubs, and feel comfortable at parties all prove difficult for those not from the United States.

Social struggles

Student Interviewee 3: “Coming to UVA I didn’t have this idea, like I was always second guessing myself on like how should I act, should I actually be myself, should I actually put myself out there the way that I feel comfortable doing, or do I need to act a certain way so I can better fit in in this completely different environment where I’m a minority.”

Student Interviewee 2: “People here are from northern Virginia so they have a lot in common and it's easy to connect with people when you have stuff in common, so, sometimes it would be hard to relate to the kind of lives people have had here because my life has been completely different, in a completely different country.”

Host: Often when meeting new people, commonalities or similar interests are an easy way to begin an engaging conversation. For the international students that I spoke with, relatability seemed to be a prevalent barrier to making friends. Felipe even noted that at times he questioned his authenticity in order to better fit in and make friends.

For some international students, like Andre, there was also the added factor of racial difference that induced anxiety when meeting a lot of new and unfamiliar people.

Student Interviewee 1: “It definitely gave me anxiety because ya, approaching a stranger. So, I guess, before I came to UVA I wasn’t that used to talking to white people.”

Host: Fourth year Giuli from Brazil spoke about being seen socially as only a Brazilian. Almost as if there was no other facet to her personality besides her being an international student.

Student Interviewee 4: “Well it might have been hard just like meeting people for the first time. Sometimes they’re kind of like interested that your from somewhere else but then its like kind of this divide almost. Like we’re still not similar enough to be friends. As they didn’t think they could relate to me, I also didn’t feel like I could relate to them. I feel like it was this mutual reservation of both parties.”

Host: As we just heard, adapting socially was a struggle – especially at first. This can not only induce feelings of loneliness and isolation, but can also lead to more serious mental health issues. It can be easy for these feelings to be perpetuated without a solid friend group to vent to and fall back on for support.

Professional development issues

[Music plays: "Groovy Synth Fuzzy Ting" by Joseph McDade]

Host: An underappreciated facet of assimilation comes in the form of professional development. College after all is about building your professional network and setting yourself up for a job after graduation. Preuvian fourth-year, Sebastian Cadillo identified how these difficulties of assimilation bleed into professional development as well.

Student Interviewee 2: "People here also have networks, contacts that they know, they know the things they have to do, they know whether they have to go to office hours, or who they have to reach out to or who they should talk to to help them get a job and stuff like that. So I feel like it was also kind of a challenge to develop that network and really get used to knowing those kind of things that I just didn't know because I was an international and my parents didn't have that experience so they didn't have the context to necessarily help me with all this kind of stuff

Host: One aspect of being an international student that is rarely discussed, but can be a big stressor on top of everything else, is the issue of having to get a visa to work in the US.

Student Interviewee 1: "I mean first off, it's a lot more competitive to earn a spot as an international because of the whole visa issue. You need to really stand out as an applicant for them to sponsor, so you have to outcompete the regular applicant basically already."

Host: When we asked Andre to use one word to describe this process of finding a job as international student, the first word that came to his mind was.

Student Interviewee 1: "Hopeless"

Host: This sentiment is an unfortunate reality for many international students. There is so much added stress of needing to find jobs that also sponsor visas. For these students, the number of jobs that they can even apply to is dramatically smaller than the typical United States student.

Student Interviewee 1: "Yeah because there's a lot less opportunities and it's a lot more competitive because of that, so it's definitely a lot more stressful."

Host: International students face barriers to assimilation in their academics, social lives, and professional development. And while many of the students I spoke with did not feel comfortable speaking directly about their mental health, they were clear about just how difficult assimilating can be.

Conclusion/closing

Host: So let's take a step back for a second and recap. To this point, we have seen how mental health is rarely discussed in the home countries of international students. We have seen how lack of discussion, combined with being far from their families and friends, leads to mental

health struggles for international students at UVA. And as a direct result, international students struggle with assimilating academically, socially, and professionally into the UVA community. But the question remains, how have international students navigated these difficult circumstances? There is one answer, community.

[Sounds of Giuli and friends watching the world cup]

Host: That was the sound of Giuli, enjoying a night in with her friends while watching Brazil play in the World Cup. Although we heard from her earlier regarding the struggles of mutual reservation when making friends, she, along with the other international students that I spoke to, ultimately found their place here at UVA through community.

Student Interviewee 1: “But as I said, as I got adjusted to the culture, I starting meeting more and more people and then from there I figured it out”

Student Interviewee 4: “community and people from different places that you can kind of like rely on and that kind of automatically become your friends, really helped me have like kind of a home here and just being able to relate to people is something we all look for”

Student Interviewee 3: “Because I found a really strong Brazilian community at UVA which is something I had no idea about so that made the whole transition and adaptation easier. It was a community that, especially first year, really helped me find my place socially and really helped me build a support network of people I could reach out to if I had any problems, if I had any questions about academics, about social life at UVA. And them also being international students from Brazil just made the whole cultural adaptation easier and being able to like connect with them much easier and it also helped me better find my space here at UVA.”

Host: Although there was a learning curve when it came to building a strong community, they all ultimately found their friends that made UVA feel like home. Whether that be other international students or not, finding people who they could relate to and feel comfortable with was of the utmost importance.

We even had the chance to ask Felipe what advice he would give to international students just beginning their time at UVA. This is what he said.

Student Interviewee 3: “And I think that’s the main piece of advice I would give to any international student, it doesn’t matter your background, your perspectives, your experiences, there is always a place for you here and a community for you here UVA and you shouldn’t be afraid to show everyone else who you are and be 100% authentic.”

Host: I am not suggesting that community is a panacea to the mental health struggles of international students at UVA. Much work remains to be done in assisting our international students with their transition to college. All of the international students I spoke to asked to have more resources and training provided by UVA to assist in their transition to college. As a part of that training, international students should receive more formal education on mental

health generally as well as the resources the university offers to its students struggling with mental health. And as the conversation around mental health becomes more destigmatized, I hope that international students can feel comfortable seeking help for their difficult transition to UVA.

Acknowledgements

[Series theme song plays: "Deep End" by Makaih Beats]

Host: This podcast was produced by Caitlyn Cordes, Nathan Hartzell, and Sebastian Oliver as a part of a collaborative project for Professor Steph Ceraso's "Writing with Sound" class at UVA. Special thanks go out to Professor Ceraso, and the international students we interviewed. A full list of audio and textual sources used in the production of this podcast can be found in the transcript associated with this episode. Thanks for listening.

[End of episode]

Works Cited

“Depression.” *World Health Organization*, World Health Organization,
<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/depression>.

Mushtaq, Raheel et al. “Relationship between loneliness, psychiatric disorders and physical health ? A review on the psychological aspects of loneliness.” *Journal of clinical and diagnostic research : JCDR* vol. 8,9 (2014): WE01-4. doi:10.7860/JCDR/2014/10077.4828