UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS ACROSS CULTURES

Working with cultural differences is as “American as apple pie,” but discussing the impact of differences on students is sometimes uncomfortable. Issues of disability, gender, color, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity/race, national origin, class and age represent California and Shasta College’s heterogeneity. While we appreciate our similarities and respect our differences, working with these differences can sometimes complicate an already stressful situation.

Many students may feel isolated and alone with their problems and may be reluctant to express themselves because they believe that being “different” is a stigma that sets them apart from others. Each person operates from his/her own cultural reference point and usually will not notice differences until confronted by something unusual or distressing. Sometimes differences become a point of focus when a student feels discomfort because of a perceived slight or misunderstanding that they believe is based on their uniqueness.

Because of our society’s continued struggle with managing various aspects of difference, we are often reluctant to ask questions, take risks, and intervene for fear of making things worse. However, the general rule of thumb in this situation is to act based on the information that you have at hand—your own experiences and the behaviors that you observe in the student. Difficulties in assessing emotional distress across cultures can be compounded by different group norms for behaviors, emotional expression, sense of privacy, or personal discomfort with contemporary U.S. cultural values.

Response:

It may be helpful to take one of the following actions:

1. Make direct contact with the student and express your concerns.
2. Reach out to the student with respect and understanding.
3. Let the student know if you have some limited knowledge of his/her culture.
4. Clearly and directly express your support.
5. Have a resource person in mind when talking to the student.
6. Ask the student if s/he has a resource person who could assist both of you with the student’s concern.
7. Tell the student that many difficulties in college are transitional and can be resolved with timely assistance and intervention.

It may not be helpful to take the following actions:

1. Assume the student will not want to relate to you.
2. Be “put off” by the student’s silence, denial or reluctance to express concerns.
3. Lose the focus of helping with distress by getting into the intricacies of the culture.