

Evaluating the mental health of international students in the U.S. during the COVID-19 outbreak: The case of University of Florida

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Abstract

Aims: During the COVID-19 outbreak, international students in the U.S. were informed that they would be deported to their home countries if enrolled in fully online programs. Although this proclamation was soon altered to permit students to continue learning online without fear of being deported, it spread a wave of stress and anxiety among international students all over the U.S. We aim to capture the emotional challenges and hardships faced by international students due to the changes in U.S. visa regulations during the COVID-19 outbreak. **Methods:** We conducted a cross-sectional online survey using previously validated questionnaire tools (PHQ-9 and GAD-7), and we received 165 complete responses from international students at University of Florida (UF). The collected data was quantitatively analyzed through ANOVA, Independent Sample t-Test, and Binary Logistic Regression. **Results:** Our findings provided insights into one main research question: “How did the changes in student visa regulations during the COVID-19 outbreak affect the anxiety and depression levels among international students at UF?” A total of 18.8% (n= 31) of our study sample had a depression score of (15 and above) on the PHQ-9 scale, which is interpreted as moderately severe to severe depressive status. A similar proportion (20.6%; n= 34) scored (15 and above) on the GAD-7 scale, and was symptomatically diagnosed as having severe anxiety. There was also a statistically significant difference in the means depression and anxiety scores based on gender, where males showed lower scores compared to any other demographic group. **Conclusion:** Our findings show that international students were affected psychologically due to changes in U.S. visa regulations during the COVID-19 outbreak. The findings of this study addressed the importance of taking serious measures when emotionally impactful political issues arise in order to prevent the development of mental illnesses among international students at institutions of higher education.

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