

Using Appreciative Advising with International Students

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Editor's note: This is the fifth in a series of articles written by students who were enrolled in Jennifer Bloom's graduate class on student affairs administration at the University of South Carolina during the spring 2009 semester. As part of her course syllabus, Dr. Bloom required each student in her class to submit an article to The Mentor or other publications for consideration.

During the last few decades, the United States has led the world in attracting the highest number of international students interested in pursuing post-secondary degrees. According to the *Open Doors* report, the number of international students at colleges and universities in the United States increased by 7.0 percent to a record high of 623,805 in the past academic year, and by 165 percent in the last three decades (Institute for International Education, 2008). This remarkable growth of international students has benefited the U.S. higher education system by increasing campus diversity, maintaining the stability of enrollment, and sustaining tuition revenue (Peterson, Briggs, Dreasher, Horner, & Nelson, 1999; Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004). On the other hand, this influx of international students poses new challenges for student and academic affairs administrators. Accordingly, U.S. institutions have come to recognize the importance of having international student advisers on staff who are charged with clarifying and meeting the needs of this special population.

It is challenging for international students to adapt to their new environment and make progress toward earning degrees. As intermediaries between international students and campus faculty and staff, international student advisers are expected to individually advise students and create programmatic initiatives designed to help international students succeed. The purpose of this paper is to explain the unique challenges that international students face and to explore how international student advisers can effectively incorporate the advising technique known as Appreciative Advising in their work with international students to help smooth their transition and contribute to their success.

Unique Challenges International Students Face

Upon coming to the United States, many international students experience a number of unique challenges that are mainly caused by moving to a new country. Some of the challenges are transitory in nature, such as adjusting to new foods, climate, and types of housing (Althen, 1984).

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However, there are additional issues that are more challenging for international students to overcome and can also impact their academic performance. The passion, enthusiasm, and expectations they had with regard to studying abroad can quickly turn to fear, distress, and anxiety. International student advisers must keep these issues in mind and strive to provide appropriate student services. The challenges with which international student advisers should be familiar are lifestyle adjustment, cultural awareness, language difficulties, and educational system differences.

Lifestyle Adjustment

International students are likely to suffer from various kinds of sociocultural problems such as loneliness, homesickness, difficulties in negotiating day-to-day social activities, and racial and ethnic discrimination (Sam, 2001). They tend to feel a deep sense of loss when leaving their families and friends behind. Previous research indicates that international students tend to experience more psychological problems than American students do as a result of this separation from loved ones (Yeh & Inose, 2003). International student advisers should develop broad perspectives on these problems to help international students free themselves from these stressors. For example, advisers should voluntarily engage their international advisees in casual conversation and, if advisers deem it necessary, introduce these students to appropriate university services, particularly health and counseling services. At the same time, international student advisers should try to be aware that international students may be reluctant to talk about their problems with individuals who, although they are professionals, are perceived to be strangers (Charles & Stewart, 1991). Another obstacle is that international students often have negative attitudes toward using health and counseling services. This is often due to cultural differences in beliefs about mental health (Yeh & Inose). Since many international students value trust when they build relationships with others, advisers should take time to gain students' trust and respect. Once they have earned this trust, advisers can politely encourage students to seek professional help.

Cultural Awareness

International students exhibit cultural differences in terms of their concept of time, their use of space, and their values (Charles & Stewart, 1991). Althen (1984) pointed out that what is logical in one place may be illogical, nonsensical, or irrelevant elsewhere. People growing up in different cultures are taught different assumptions and values. As a result, international students may perceive or be subjected to racial and ethnic discrimination. It is essential that advisers respect individuals instead of seeing them as stereotyped members of a particular ethnic group. International student advisers must be sensitive to these cultural aspects and become self-aware enough to explain these differences to international students without causing conflict. As professionals who have experience dealing with cross-cultural issues, international student advisers have the responsibility to foster cultural sensitivity among their co-workers and the institution as a whole. International student advisers are well positioned to lead seminars or workshops to share their cross-cultural experiences, and host international fairs or festivals for American students, faculty, and staff. These types of events will contribute to fostering mutual understanding and creating a better multicultural environment on campus.

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Language Difficulties

Language difficulties are another big challenge for international students. A lack of English skills is likely to affect international students' academic performance (Yeh & Inose, 2003). If the students' English proficiency is a handicap, advisers may want to consider recommending that students reduce their workload as far as the students' immigration standing allows (National Association of Foreign Student Affairs, 1975; Charles & Stewart, 1991). As for the communication issue, in order to save face or be polite, international students may nod their heads or smile to convey that they understand what is being said even if they do not understand. Therefore, asking closed-ended questions such as “do you understand?” may not be the best way to determine whether the students have understood or not (Charles & Stewart). One way to avoid miscommunication is to ask students to paraphrase or summarize what the adviser has said in order to confirm that the student understands the points the adviser is attempting to make.

Educational System Differences

Many international students may experience difficulties adjusting to academic requirements of American institutions because the expectations are quite different from what they have experienced in their home countries. Some students may not be accustomed to the competitive environment of many American colleges and universities (Charles & Stewart, 1991), and others are more accustomed to knowledge-based curricula, so they are not as confident answering questions that require critical thinking skills and/or participating in group discussions. In such cases, advisers should not force them to adjust to the American educational system, but rather explain the differences and help them understand both educational systems and work together on how they can succeed in reaching their academic goals.

Applying Appreciative Advising to International Students

To help international students adjust to university life, advisers of international students should consider adopting Appreciative Advising as a theoretical framework. Appreciative Advising is based on the theory of Appreciative Inquiry (AI). AI is an organizational development tool that focuses on bringing out the best in people and organizations, instead of viewing them as problems that need to be solved (Bloom & Martin, 2002). Appreciative Advising is the intentional collaborative practice of asking positive, open-ended questions that help students optimize their educational experiences and achieve their dreams, goals, and potential (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008). There are six phases of Appreciative Advising: Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver, and Don't Settle (Bloom et al.). This section of the paper will identify specific ways that international student advisers can incorporate the principles from the six phases of Appreciative Advising when advising their students.

Disarm

The Disarm phase is an integral part of making a positive first impression with international students. International student advisers can create a safe and welcoming environment by decorating their offices with pictures taken from their trips overseas or souvenirs from

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international students. It is essential to meet each student at the door and introduce themselves in order to make their students feel welcome (Bloom et al., 2008). A handshake is favorable when advisers greet students since the majority of international students know Western-style greetings. However, advisers should not be upset if the student refuses a handshake for cultural reasons. International student advisers also should use the student's name often during the conversation to make sure that advisers pronounce the name correctly. If the name is difficult to pronounce, the adviser can ask the student to say it slowly. This stage helps advisers demonstrate their interest in students from other countries and break the ice before initiating further discussion.

Discover

In the Discover phase, international student advisers should draw out the students' hobbies, strengths, and passions by asking open-ended questions (Bloom et al., 2008). Advisers can ask questions about students' home countries and share their own intercultural and international experiences. Some sample Discover questions are, "Tell me about your journey to America," "What challenges did you overcome to study in the U.S.?" and "Tell me about a time you felt most proud to be from your home country." These questions and prompts encourage students to share their stories and help advisers to gain trust and respect from international students. Some international students might have difficulties communicating in English. In order to avoid communication misunderstandings, international student advisers should confirm and summarize the statements that are made by the students and rephrase them if necessary.

Dream

The Dream phase is the stage when advisers help students formulate a vision of what they might become and then assist them in developing their life and career goals (Bloom et al., 2008). In this stage, international student advisers help students define what they want to achieve in the United States by asking about their hopes and dreams for the future. Some sample Dream questions are, "What are your biggest hopes and dreams for your future?" and "Do you plan on moving back to your home country once you complete your education? Why or why not?" Advisers should listen purposefully to students' answers to these questions in order to assess what students' dreams and goals are.

Design

After discussing students' interests and dreams, advisers should help them devise concrete, incremental, and achievable goals (Bloom et al., 2008). International student advisers can brainstorm with students about how they can best achieve their goals. Since students' information may be limited, advisers can attach their professional knowledge to the students' ideas, as appropriate, in order to help define the necessary resources that can turn their dreams into reality. Given that most international students are not familiar with their new surroundings, advisers should make appropriate referrals to campus offices, including the counseling center and people in the local community. When advisers provide referrals, they should make phone calls on the student's behalf or walk the student over to the appropriate department. This is because some

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international students are not confident enough to search for help on their own (Charles & Stewart, 1991). International student advisers also need to encourage students to write down questions that they have for the person to whom advisers are referring them.

Deliver

In the Deliver phase, once international students design plans to achieve their goals, advisers should encourage them to follow through on these plans (Bloom et al., 2008). International student advisers can facilitate this by following up with advisees after the appointment to inquire about their progress and by expressing confidence that students can accomplish the plans that they created together. Advisers should reiterate to international students that they should return to the advising office if they run into problems.

Don't Settle

The last phase of Appreciative Advising is Don't Settle. In this stage, international student advisers proactively raise international students' internal bar of expectations (Bloom et al., 2008). Advisers can give international students positive feedback and encourage them to continue to use the momentum they have achieved to accomplish even more. Advisers can help students set new goals by asking, "What is one thing that you can do even better?" As long as advisers think students are capable of higher expectations, this stage is woven throughout the advising process.

Conclusion

International students face unique challenges when pursuing educational opportunities in the United States. In order to surmount these challenges and achieve their educational goals, these students need self-confidence and successful academic plans. Because of its focus on individuals' strengths, Appreciative Advising is a great tool to draw out international students' potential and help them create a positive learning environment. By learning to emphasize their own strengths, students can be encouraged and better able to focus on accomplishing their educational goals. For international students, working with advisers who can understand and support them is of tremendous importance. Students never forget advisers who create a positive impact on their lives. By using Appreciative Advising techniques, international student advisers can help international students get the most out of their studies in the United States.

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