

DEVELOPING SELF-KNOWLEDGE AS A FIRST STEP TOWARD CULTURAL COMPETENCE

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An effective advisor demonstrates the ability to work with each and every student who presents for assistance. To gain this proficiency, both new and experienced advisors benefit from exploring and developing their cultural competence—the behaviors, policies, and attitudes that allow for individuals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations (National Association of School Psychologists, n.d.). Cultural competence allows advisors to understand and appreciate both their own backgrounds and those of others, including those vastly different from their own.

Advisors educated in counseling or psychology may have received some training in cultural competence through their personal academic experiences. However, all advisors may feel unprepared to face challenges in relating with those whose circumstances and upbringing differ from their own. Negotiating these experiences requires a strong understanding of self—personal identity and background as well as limitations and biases. Advisors also need intimate knowledge of the institution as well as an appreciation for their students. Using self-knowledge as a foundation, this chapter offers an exploration on ways advisors can explore, accept, and overcome their assumptions to benefit their students.

Knowing and Educating Oneself

Evaluate One's Own Limitations

Blane Harding (2007) argued that, as important as it is to understand students, advisors must gain self-awareness as well. Some advisors may readily identify with visible or obvious areas of diversity in specific situations, such as gender, race, or sexual identity, but may be less conscious of the other ways in which they add to the diversity of their department or campus. A recent graduate, hired as the youngest staff advisor in the department, likely brings a unique ability to connect to traditional-aged college students. A newly hired advisor with significant prior work experience, however, may more easily relate with parents or nontraditional students. Similarly, an advisor with a distinct academic background, such as science or philosophy, may offer others in the unit a unique perspective on core curricula or major courses. Differences encourage diversity of thought, which in turn inspires students to think more broadly.

New advisors benefit from evaluating their own diversity, their comfort level with the uniqueness of others, and their personal limitations. Advisors who embrace campus diversity unequivocally but try to mask discomfort with those representing particular populations will likely struggle more than those who acknowledge biases and seek to improve their own understanding. For example, an advisor raised in a homogenous neighborhood and who later attended similarly homogenous educational institutions may feel nervous when working with others who express themselves in an unfamiliar way. Rather than hiding their uncertainty when communicating with people unlike past peers, the advisor would benefit from addressing the apprehension and seeking opportunities for growth.

Although one can and should appreciate the experiences of others, no one has ever truly walked in another's shoes. Advisors should show care, empathy, and respect, but must recognize that they will never experience life as lived by those distinct from themselves. By acknowledging gaps in diversity and asking for guidance from those with greater cultural competence, advisors can make significant progress toward their own cultural competence.

Recognizing Assumptions

Understanding one's experiences and bases of knowledge assists advisors in moving toward cultural competence. In another step, one recognizes his or her assumptions.

Relying on one's lived experiences beneficially informs a relationship with a student, but it can prove incredibly dangerous if underlying assumptions remain unquestioned. New advisors may base their premises on the undergraduate institution(s) they have attended. Those who experienced a rich residential and student life at a public 4-year university, for example, may presume that adult students undergo a less fulfilling education than those with residential experiences. Similarly, advisors who attended institutions focused on professional programs, such as engineering or business, may struggle to overcome negative attitudes about the value of the core curriculum at a liberal arts college and demonstrate difficulty explaining its value to students.

Unexamined advisor assumptions may prove more detrimental to the advising relationship when the student's personal life differs significantly from that of the advisor. For example, a Black, gay advisor who overcame significant challenges because of both racial bias and prejudice regarding his sexual orientation may assume that all White heterosexual students easily assimilate at college or that all gay students of color face issues similar to his own. A White female advisor from a background of economic privilege and exemplary academic achievement may not recognize that her expectations of first-year students do not match up with the advisees' experiences. For example, when meeting a freshman from an economically disadvantaged home and with an average academic profile, this advisor may not provide the in-depth academic information needed or ensure that the student knows about on-campus support services or the study strategies that bolster academic success.

In addition, advisors must not assume that all students with common life experiences fit into a particular mold, such as those related to age, educational experience, or veteran status. Assumptions inhibit the ability to recognize individual student differences and risk both the advisor–advisee relationship and the appropriateness of the information communicated; not all veterans on campus are experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder any more than all valedictorians are naturally brilliant and need no academic assistance.

Advisors must recognize that, like students, they are products of their experiences, education, and environment and that these backgrounds include personal assumptions (Harding, 2007). Advisors are not (and cannot be) experts on the real life of each and every individual student; in addition, to some extent, advisors can learn only that which students are willing to share. Therefore, the advisor must fill the gaps in a student’s story by asking appropriate questions and subsequently proffer advice based on cultural competence.

Understanding the Institution

Much like people, institutions have unique individual characteristics. Not only do they vary by size, but also their curricula reflect foci that range from the small liberal arts colleges to large flagship institutions. Their mission, whether for career-focused for-profit institutions or developmental community colleges, often bespeaks their on-campus cultures. The more attuned advisors become to the environment around them, the more effectively they can identify and meet the needs of their students.

Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal (2013) described four lenses through which individuals can view their organizations: structural, human resource, political, and symbolic. Individuals who view their organizations through structural frameworks seek change through organization and hierarchy, and persons who view their organizations through a human resource framework seek change through empowerment and meeting employee needs. Coalition building and power shifts characterize political frameworks; individuals who embody symbolic frameworks seek change through inspiration, purpose, and rituals. New advisors benefit from understanding the dominant lens used by others in their new environments, because even those with an amenable viewpoint will often fail to shift the focus of those around them. Specifically, new advisors in a political landscape will need to discern the entities who hold power in an organization, but if they land in a human resource zone, they must learn the symbols, rituals, and shared history to effectively communicate.

The dichotomies clearly emerge in a comparison of two hypothetical large, private, research institutions established in the late 19th century. At one, a new advisor may hear that success depends upon working with specific powerful individuals at the institutional or departmental levels; at the other institution, the new advisor learns that success is associated with working collaboratively within and across departments.

Advisors may enter the employ of an institution with a different dominant framework than that of their previous employers or those they had attended as a student.

The sooner they can identify the dominant framework, the more quickly they can negotiate the new workplace. Two institutions that look identical on paper often feel dissimilar when experienced personally.

The answers to the following questions assist advisors in understanding not only institutional culture, but also ways they might fit into that culture: Are decision makers operating at a distance, or do they collaborate frequently with frontline advising staff? Is advising held in esteem at the institution? Do personnel consider concerns of underrepresented students? Advisors may perceive the needs of their students as invisible to decision makers who work at a distance and must creatively make the needs of their students heard, especially those not part of the institution's majority. For example, if an institution's leadership demonstrates disengagement toward diverse students, advisors may not garner requested resources, such as funds, space, or additional personnel to improve the campus services for special populations. Similarly, if it perceives advising as the mere process of assisting students in reading the catalog and registering for classes and therefore does not prioritize it, advisors may lack resources, such as funding for professional development or additional staff, needed to educate students more fully and personally. In an ironic twist, students in stark environments may need greater advising support to overcome institutional challenges.

Perhaps most important, an understanding of the institutional culture allows advisors to effectively support students by either encouraging or challenging the assumptions that students bring to their new environment, culture, and expectations. Advisors must recognize that the expectations of students may not comport with the manner in which the institution functions; therefore, to explain to students how the system works and their fit within it, advisors must possess knowledge of the institution.

Understanding Diverse Students

Several theories inform advisors about student development in the context of cultural competence. Donald R. Atkinson, George Morten, and Derald Wing Sue (1998) put forth the racial identity model, which suggests a transition from conformity to the majority culture through withdrawal from the dominant culture and finding balance between it and all aspects of one's own heritage.

Foundational theories for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) development include Vivienne Cass's (1979) homosexual identity development model,¹ which explains stages of sexual identity development, and Anthony R. D'Augelli's (1994) model, which suggests growth as a process, rather than linear stages, and identifies the need for development both individually and within communities of support.

Ethnic development theories, such as Vasti Torres's (2003) Hispanic identity model, discuss the manner in which the individual student sees her or himself as a part of a

¹Although Cass's theoretical model has, in some ways, become outdated culturally, it remains foundational for understanding identity formation among the LGBTQ community.

particular cultural community. Torres encourages individuals to determine particular areas of identity and consider whether each characteristic is part of a larger perspective of personhood or is the sole identifying characteristic such that the person stands in isolation and fails to integrate into a larger campus culture.

Advisors should encourage students to develop across multiple levels of identity but also understand that different aspects of experience and identity may emerge at different points during the college experience. A review of chapter 4 will provide advisors with a variety of theoretical frameworks with which to learn about their students, ranging from paradigms of student involvement to those related to identity development and developmental learning.

Advisors also may benefit from a big-picture perspective. By becoming familiar with the overall demographics and entering characteristics of the students on campus, as well as personally observing various groups of students as they experience campus life, an advisor gains understanding of students and can connect them to the most appropriate resources. Theories of development, demographics, or observations cannot give advisors a full story of any individual student, but over time, as advisors gain experience with students and with their campus, they recognize similarities in the narratives that point to specific student needs. In this way, advisors can sometimes identify areas of concern, such as financial stressors, not specifically disclosed by the student. Chapter 9 and Applications and Insights—Advisor Checklist of Questions: Student Information to Learn in Year 1 provide frameworks in which advisors may consider student-related data, such as academic background and test scores, as well as prior advising interactions and demonstrated knowledge of the campus environment.

Despite the proven resources available, the best way for advisors to learn about their students is to listen to them. To address the complexity of advising interactions across differences, advisors can use a five-question framework as a helpful guide for facilitating revealing discussions.

Five Questions

To prevent assumptions from limiting their interactions with students, advisors must remain reflective and self-aware. They can accomplish this consciousness by considering common questions that encourage broad thinking about each individual student. Over time, each advisor develops an individualized process for evaluating students' needs and establishing positive relationships. Five questions, in particular, provide a framework for initiating the assessment of student needs and advisor presumptions.

How Does the Student's Experience Differ From My Own? To recognize the ways in which the advisee's life experiences differ from those of the advisor, the advisor should consider the ways that the student's diversity may have influenced his or her experience. Just as important, however, the advisor must acknowledge that those areas of advisee and advisor experiences overlap; perhaps the advisor and advisee differ in gender and race but come from similar areas of the country, or they are of the same

gender and race but have had dramatically different educational experiences. Answers to this question help an advisor guard against making inaccurate assumptions.

Am I Making Assumptions About This Student Based Upon Both Visible and Invisible Areas of Diversity? Everyone makes assumptions based upon diversity. When meeting someone who appears entirely different from oneself, an individual may assume that the other's life experiences will differ completely from one's own as well; conversely, a person may assume that someone with similarities to oneself has had life experiences nearly identical to one's own. For example, the LGBTQ-identifying advisor with a difficult coming out experience, including an unwelcoming family, may assume that the LGBTQ student mentioning family problems is experiencing difficulty coming out; in fact, other challenges in family dynamics, not related to LGBTQ issues, may be causing the student's concerns; for example, perhaps step-family conflicts or legal problems of a sibling create anxiousness in the student.

Similarly, advisors may inaccurately apply stereotypes and advise students inappropriately. For example, a student attending a university on a basketball scholarship may not be focused primarily on the professional draft, but may aspire to run a Fortune 500 company. Although seldom formed out of offense or hostility, assumptions based on typical patterns or cohort characteristics can prevent advisors from connecting in a genuine way with the student.

How Do My Assumptions About All Students on This Campus Seem to Fit or Not Fit This Student? Advisors on campuses with a fairly homogenous population may apply assumptions about the study body as a whole to individual students. For example, at an institution where students usually seek paid work while attending classes, advisors may assume that all students must negotiate their education around the needs of employers. Conversely, if most students come from wealthy families, advisors may incorrectly presume that every student experiences privilege and need not worry about employment.

If an advisor assumes that every student has matriculated directly from high school to campus because most follow this pattern, the needs of adult students, transfers, and veterans may remain unexplored. Advisors must consciously ask how the needs of specific students differ from those of the majority of the campus population.

Even at institutions enrolling diverse cohorts, advisors may make assumptions about one advisee based upon conversations with numerous students who appear alike. For example, advisors may inaccurately presume that students associated with certain campus organizations, such as Greek life, share certain personal or demographic characteristics, such as extroversion or a middle-class background. Likewise, although students in certain majors typically show fairly similar academic interests and strengths, and many struggle in particular courses, the advisor must not assume, for example, that an engineering major will dislike or struggle in composition classes.

In addition, advisors should recognize that students who bring diversity to the campus share similarities with the larger study body. Advisors who embrace only a student's uniqueness may hamstring their own ability to truly understand the individual and may focus too much on the areas of differences when rendering advice.

What Student Characteristics Contribute to Academic Successes or Challenges?

Advisors may inadvertently approach diversity from a place of deficit by solely considering the challenges an individual has or must overcome to achieve academic goals. Certainly advisors should not ignore any specific assistance a student needs based on unique identities; however, when assuming that the first-generation student, for example, will struggle because of lacking college role models, the advisor may overlook the hard work and earned resilience that a working-class student has demonstrated and can employ to reach academic goals. Similarly, advisors who presume that a student of a racial or ethnic minority will feel isolated on campus may not realize the extensive miles the student has logged in navigating environments where he or she is not part of the majority.

To avoid unhelpful assumptions, advisors must investigate the characteristics that have helped the student succeed or have created challenges for her or him. They should see (and encourage students to recognize) how diversity contributes to the strength and success of the institution. Advisors can speak to students about how differences in perspective expand and inspire each of them. Perhaps even more important, students whose higher education experience is comprised of interactions only with those like themselves are likely less prepared for a diverse workplace and world than those who have embraced the opportunity afforded by on-campus diversity.

What Types of Support Does This Student (and This Campus) Possess to Address Specific Areas of Diversity That He or She Represents? Students who represent areas of diversity that are rare on campus may feel isolated and can benefit from identifying individuals like themselves as well as a campus community that welcomes their uniqueness. Advisors benefit from familiarity with the ways that the campus encourages diversity.

Some campuses may have established formal units, such as multicultural or diversity offices, or support services, such as an office of disability resources or a transfer center. Some offer full programs of support for first-generation college students or for veterans integrating into civilian life. Others may host student organizations or offer informal groups. If few or none of these support systems exist on campus, the advisor and student should seek information about those in the immediate community to supplement on-campus services.

Using the Five Questions

The following case studies illustrate ways advisors gain cognizance of the influence of students' backgrounds and experiences through use of the five questions. They

also remind advisors that, regardless of whether the student has been influenced by traditional or nontraditional experiences, she or he should not be defined by any one characteristic. Advisors should consider the questions as tools in a large box, useful for giving advisors the ability to pick and choose, as appropriate, for the individual students with whom they work.

Case Study 10.1

Melissa, a young Caucasian advisor at an urban research university, identifies as a part of the LGBTQ and Jewish communities. Her advisee, Bobby, a Latino freshman who chose the institution for its strong business program, begins to discuss the challenges he is facing in transitioning to the institution. “The big city,” he says, “is very different from where I grew up.” He expresses concerns that the changes he is experiencing, including those related to his own sexual orientation, would not be welcomed in his rural home community. “My dad said that in the city, ‘all the liberals and the gays would push me away from Christ.’” Pointing to a picture of Melissa, her children, and her wife from her recent wedding, Bobby asks, “Is that your family?” Upon Melissa’s confirming answer, he adds, “Maybe you are the right person to help me.”

How Does the Student’s Experience Differ From My Own?

For Melissa, Bobby’s story might seem similar to her own, as they both identify, to varying degrees, with the LGBTQ community. Melissa’s coming out experience, however, did not include the same kind of family challenges that Bobby faces. Bobby also presents other visible signs of diversity, including his ethnicity and religion. Melissa should acknowledge and appreciate any common issues they have experienced with regard to sexual orientation and also consider Bobby’s unique story. She should not attempt to deemphasize Bobby’s connection with the photograph of her family, but she should identify how this part of his identity fits within the larger picture of his early experiences on campus. Therefore, she asks Bobby to share more details about his integration on campus in the first few weeks or inquires about his support systems. To start the conversation, she encourages him to share about his new acquaintances and about life in a residence hall.

Am I Making Assumptions About This Student Based Upon Both Visible and Invisible Areas of Diversity?

Based on his comments, Melissa may assume that Bobby needs to connect to other LGBTQ students. However, she first must uncover the salient aspects of his identity as he sees them. For example, based on the reference to Bobby’s father, Melissa may wrongly presume that Bobby is moving away from the church

in which he was raised. Similarly, she may inaccurately assume he views his ethnicity secondary to his sexual orientation. To clarify the life roles important to Bobby, Melissa asks him directly about his faith community and whether he has found support on campus or has remained connected to anyone at his home church. Although advisors must remain cautious about extensive self-disclosure, especially early in an advising relationship, Melissa draws on her own experience in diverse communities to probe Bobby's connections to both the on-campus LGBTQ community and to social organizations that may feel genuine to him.

How Do My Assumptions About All Students on This Campus Seem to Fit or Not Fit This Student?

From her knowledge of other successful business students, Melissa may incorrectly presume that Bobby brings a strong academic experience consistent with success in the business program. In focusing on Bobby's visible or disclosed diversity, she must not fail to look into Bobby's academic record and recognize personal growth issues typical of a student away from home for the first time. In addition, Melissa may assume that students who come to this institution seek the benefits from the surrounding city; however, reflection on Bobby's words suggests that this new environment may seem intimidating to him and reflect a college choice unsupported by his family.

What Student Characteristics Contribute to Academic Successes or Challenges?

Melissa's interaction with Bobby should demonstrate an understanding of Bobby's challenges in finding areas of strength in his academic and his personal life. Furthermore, Bobby's initiation into city living may serve as a source of excitement that may encourage him to integrate socially or a source of frustration, or even fear, further isolating him from others on campus and distracting him from his academic focus. Although Bobby recognizes that his family of origin may not support his sexual orientation or his choice to attend an urban university, Melissa encourages him to explore his own choices, recognizing the pros and cons of each, and embrace the opportunity to reflect and make decisions independently.

What Types of Support Does This Student (and This Campus) Possess to Address Specific Areas of Diversity That He or She Represents?

Melissa should be aware of the support structures on campus not only for LGBTQ students but also for those of ethnic minorities and various faith-based groups. She might know of other students addressing issues of sexuality or exploring sexual orientation in an environment that includes nonsupportive families and home communities. She may also want to refer Bobby to religious

communities known to welcome LGBTQ individuals to which Bobby could turn should his home church reject him or he feel compelled to leave it. Similarly, Melissa can connect Bobby with other ethnic students with whom Bobby might identify.

Certainly, on a personal level, Melissa can serve as a positive role model for Bobby, but she must ensure that he knows of other resources as well, including faculty members in his academic area. Finally, Melissa may suggest that Bobby meet with second-year students from his hometown region to help him integrate into the urban environment in a way that keeps him connected with his upbringing; she may want to confirm the level of association he has established with existing on-campus or community organizations. To further gauge Bobby's comfort level with an investigation of specific support groups for LGBTQ concerns, Melissa and Bobby may discuss with whom he has shared his sexual identity, possibly role-playing conversations in a way that promotes Bobby's ability to seek support networks on his own.

Case Study 10.2

Rahul works as an advisor at a community college in a small town. A first-generation American of Indian descent, he gained an interest in college advising when a career-ending injury caused him to lose an athletic scholarship and he took a work–study position helping in the advising center of his alma mater.

As he reviews his schedule for the day, Rahul sees the name “Maria Chu” on his list. When on campus, Maria, a traditional-aged first-generation student of Vietnamese ancestry, has always used crutches and the assistance of her mother, an immigrant who speaks very little English, to navigate the campus terrain. According to the appointment notes, Maria wants to discuss future plans for transferring. Upon their visit, after a few minutes of small talk, Maria asks about future options in light of her recent acceptance into the honor society.

How Does the Student's Experience Differ From My Own?

Rahul's experience with a personal injury helps him understand some of the practical issues Maria experiences in navigating the physical landscape of the campus. However, his temporary injury, and the devices he needed for mobility, do not equate to Maria's lifelong use of crutches and personal assistance. In addition, his experience as a first-generation American and son of immigrant parents certainly comports with Maria's role in her family, so he may relate to any pressures she may feel to succeed as a representative of the family. Finally, although not of the same national origin, Rahul identifies as an ethnic minority, and therefore appreciates that Maria's Asian heritage may make her feel isolated on campus.

Am I Making Assumptions About This Student Based Upon Both Visible and Invisible Areas of Diversity?

Rahul should not assume that he fully understands how Maria experiences life with a permanent physical disability, but he likely appreciates the extended time and effort she needs to reach her on-campus destinations. He might inaccurately assume that her goals will need to be tailored because of dependence upon her family. Because of his own experience, Rahul may also presume that Maria feels undue pressure from her family. Furthermore, due to the prevailing cultural differences among families in Western and Asian cultures, he may wrongly presume the extent of her mother's role in Maria's decision making. Finally, as Melissa does with Bobby, Rahul may need to determine the salient identities that affect Maria's point of view, and in addition, he should not assume that her use of physical assistance indicates the presence or absence of other disabilities.

To directly address Maria's concerns about transfer and her future, he must keep a proper perspective of all the diversity issues possibly associated with Maria's situation, but directly ask her about her prior experiences and her course work to determine her academic strengths and challenges. He also needs to ask Maria about the role her mother is to play in their discussions to indicate that he intends Maria to guide this interaction.

How Do My Assumptions About All Students on This Campus Seem to Fit or Not Fit This Student?

Working at a community college, Rahul likely has worked with diverse students in terms of age, ethnicity, academic backgrounds, and veteran status and with a wide variety of life experiences. He may simply expect all students to face some form of challenge and may see Maria's physical disability as no greater than that faced by other students. However, Rahul may consider Maria's mobility issues as more substantial than barriers to access that other students overcome; conversely, he may see them as inconveniences that pale compared to the issues faced by students without the family support that Maria enjoys.

Again, the role of family support could contribute to Maria's unique situation among students, and Rahul may assume that her mother's constant presence limits Maria's ability to connect independently with other students her age. Therefore, rather than presume a negative influence of her family, Rahul asks Maria about her social life on campus and friends.

Throughout their conversation he must solicit or listen for details about Maria's values and goals. Furthermore, rather than dwell on practical aspects of her mobility, Rahul must recognize that Maria has successfully navigated difficult environments in her life and like all other potential transfer students now needs trustworthy, accurate information on which to make an informed decision about her future.

What Student Characteristics Contribute to Academic Successes or Challenges?

Rahul realizes that Maria will need to address and obtain assistance with mobility wherever she transfers, and although all institutions receiving federal funding must comply with ADA mandates for accommodations, some institutions and situations will likely offer Maria more ease of accessibility than others. He must also recognize that Maria exhibits a great deal of resilience to meet the goals she sets for herself.

Although her current dependence on her mother for mobility may present a potential stumbling block to independence, family support in all realms of her life, which eludes many students, may prove valuable to Maria's academic success. Therefore, Rahul helps Maria investigate her interests in careers and future education to assist her in determining the best options for her unique circumstances and to encourage her continued success.

What Types of Support Does This Student (and This Campus) Possess to Address Specific Areas of Diversity That He or She Represents?

Rahul knows that Maria must connect with the Office of Disability Resources on this and her new campus. Rahul must respect all aspects of Maria—the diverse and the typical, in total—and not solely focus on her disability; she certainly possesses the expertise on that aspect of her life. In addition to support staff who may assist with accessibility, Maria may benefit from connections with students who share other characteristics with her, such as those within the honor society, her major, or in a Vietnamese American student group. Rahul encourages her personal and independent growth through referrals and direct contacts on her behalf in areas in which she expresses an interest.

Case Study 10.3

Tim, an African American advisor, begins his first professional position at the historically Black college where he recently completed his bachelor's degree. At orientation, an African American woman named Tasha, who appears to be in her forties, approaches him and asks for assistance. Tim recognizes her name as one on his advisee list. Tasha immediately expresses concern about her decision to return to school: "Everyone looks so young—even you! You're young enough to date my daughter, and you're the one who's supposed to help me?" Tim is taken aback by her boldness when she asks, "Is there a way to change advisors to someone with more life experience?"

Of all the potential challenges to their advising relationship and Tim's ability to teach Tasha about the university, the college experience, and the curriculum, the most damaging would be Tim's buy-in to Tasha's presumption that his youth and limited life experience render him an ineffective advisor. Tim should embrace her boldness, which seemed initially offensive, as a virtue; furthermore, he can confront her presumptions because she has shared them. Although Tasha has more life experience, Tim need not shy away from serving as her advisor if he can trust in his training and education to help ameliorate the differences associated with their age difference. Therefore, Tim encourages Tasha to keep their first appointment, and Tasha agrees.

How Does the Student's Experience Differ From My Own?

Tim cannot fully understand Tasha's experience as an adult student enrolling in college after dropping out decades ago. However, he can certainly find other areas of identity with which he can connect with Tasha. Their similar racial identity may prove as important for their relationship as generational differences because Tim represents the success that Tasha seeks as a graduate of this institution.

He inquires about her choices for obtaining an education and choosing their shared institution. He also looks for other similarities to emerge, such as family characteristics or academic interests.

Despite attempts to find them, Tim uncovers few similarities with Tasha, but does not avoid her concerns about his age or act defensively about her assumptions on his experience level. Instead, Tim inquires about her future plans and perceptions of the strengths she brings to campus. He encourages her to elaborate upon her past successes and challenges and uses that information along with her stated goals to demonstrate both his ability and knowledge while helping her link to resources on campus.

Am I Making Assumptions About This Student Based Upon Both Visible and Invisible Areas of Diversity?

Tim learns that Tasha's family or her job has taken priority over her education, delaying her return to college. However, he must resist the temptation to think that these roles will continue to take priority over her education. He must also avoid assumptions about Tasha's ability to complete the course work because she has not attended college in recent years. Depending upon his experience with other adult students on the campus and in light of her negative reaction to the ages represented at orientation, Tim may make assumptions about Tasha's ability to find others with whom she can connect, but he must remember that other potential areas of diversity, her race and gender, place her in the majority at this particular historically Black college. In addition, despite the

similarities that Tasha shares with the student body, Tim must not discount the other areas of invisible diversity that Tasha may possess, such as the compounding reasons she did not complete her education earlier (e.g., a divorce, caretaker to parents, and so forth) or academic challenges (e.g., test anxiety) undisclosed to Tim.

How Do My Assumptions About All Students on This Campus Seem to Fit or Not Fit This Student?

Although a new advisor, Tim draws on his time as a student at the institution to determine ways Tasha can fit into the larger campus environment. Despite knowing that students at this institution form cliques in residence halls, leaving adult students and commuters out of certain social circles, he also recognizes that students connect primarily on the basis of academic interest, making them welcoming to students regardless of age and background. Therefore, he encourages Tasha to seek like-minded acquaintances in her classes.

In addition to his personal experience, Tim looks at institutional data indicating that most current students choose this institution to link with others based upon racial identity, and Tim knows that Tasha chose the institution based upon its proximity to her home and family. With the combination of insider and data-driven knowledge, Tim may be uniquely positioned to help Tasha's personal growth by suggesting the points of assimilation and differences that may emerge in unexpected ways: Tasha may find more relationships with young people based on academic interests than she will with other, perhaps older, students primarily connected through their racial identity.

What Student Characteristics Contribute to Academic Successes or Challenges?

Tasha may think of her age as a disadvantage because it seems to separate her from the majority of the campus's students. Likewise, her family commitments differentiate her from her classroom peers. However, the sacrifices made for her family may inspire her to succeed in a way that challenges her classmates, and her life experience helps her link classroom lessons to the real world. Her racial identity, especially combined with her generational status, may allow her to connect to the history of the institution, and possibly to the faculty, to bridge any gap created by age. In fact, her lived experience in the local community may help her communicate a perspective about the historically Black college and surrounding region that may resonate with others seeking to more fully understand the heritage they share at the institution and in society.

What Types of Support Does This Student (and This Campus) Possess to Address Specific Areas of Diversity That He or She Represents?

Tim investigates whether this campus has a support group for adult students or an active women's center. He also encourages Tasha to rely on prior relationships through which she gains support. He recognizes the strength that Tasha's family may provide and suggests that Tasha seek connection to these less conventional resources for college success.

Summary

No advisor, regardless of experience, can fully prepare for every student who walks into an appointment. However, all can work toward understanding their own strengths and challenges with regard to cultural competence. Furthermore, advisors can ensure that their understanding of their institutions and the manner in which others within it embrace (or fail to embrace) diversity allows them to support more effectively the students in their charge. By using a systematic approach to working with all students, new advisors develop a skill set that enables them to meet advising learning goals while gaining important experience that furthers their own development in understanding and educating diverse students.

Aiming for Excellence

- Attend activities and events both on campus and in the community that represent a broad range of cultures, including your own. Demonstrate to students the value you place in cultural competence by being visible at events in which you appear to be an outsider.
- Seek mentors in areas where you lack expertise. If new to an institution, find a mentor with significant institutional memory as well as those within other departments with whom you can effectively partner.
- Do not assume that your mentor will guide the relationship; ask questions such as “What do you like most about working here?” “If I have a good idea about something, who do I talk to about it?” and “How do advisors get involved in decision making?” to identify institutional and unit strengths and challenges as well as the influential formal and informal leaders on campus.
- Speak with students, both your advisees and others around campus, about their experiences. Find out the good and poor sources for student advocacy.
- Work with those who are marginalized to bring their concerns to the forefront.

- Attend or start an advisor reading group. Suggest not only articles that reflect diverse subject matter, but also authors who exhibit uniqueness in race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and background.
- Share and gain knowledge across institutional lines. Find faculty members, paraprofessionals, and administrators to speak at your next department meeting or in-service.
- Be vulnerable. Admit to gaps in your knowledge so you can learn more. If your personal experience does not include exposure to specific groups, ask those responsible for educating and mentoring these cohorts about the history of the group, student needs, and opportunities for involvement.
- Review NACADA resources, including both the NACADA Clearinghouse and the Commissions and Interest Groups specific to student populations to learn about various student cohorts.
- Select one of the case studies presented in this chapter. For each of the five questions, develop questions that will elicit solid information from the student and will improve your understanding and advice to all students.
- Many institutions have established professional development programs or diversity offices that offer workshops dealing with cultural competency or global cultural awareness. After attending a workshop, make a list of the skills and ideas helpful in your advising practice. Identify two skills or ideas to implement immediately. In your journal, record the ways in which your new tools are working. Revisit your list on a monthly basis and continue to implement skills and ideas until you have gone through your entire list. (Folsom, 2007, p. 107)
- Request that the person in charge of advisor training and development invite a diverse group of students to discuss their experiences at your institution as well as identify the assistance they seek from advising (Folsom, 2007, p. 107). Where no advisor training and development exists, consider inviting students to an informal feedback session (offer snacks).
- Consider whether your office is welcoming to all populations. What can you do to make your office welcoming to all student populations? (Folsom, 2007, p. 107)

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