

# VOICES FROM THE FIELD

## ADVISING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

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Internationalization of higher education, although no longer a new phenomenon to academic advisors, may operationally vary according to region. Many European countries focus on internationalizing curricula, while investment attracts foreign students to and from China. In the United States, postsecondary institutions focus on promoting study abroad programs and building branch campuses overseas, and British colleges and universities are dedicated to recruiting foreign students and establishing business and research relations abroad (Layton, 2012). In this *Voices From the Field*, I examine the reasons for the international flow of students, the impact of internationalization on U.S. postsecondary institutions, and ways academic advising can positively influence the experience of international students studying in the United States.

The latest data from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Institute for Statistics (2014, ¶2) stated that “In 2012, at least 4 million students went abroad to study, up from 2 million in 2000, representing 1.8% of all tertiary enrollments or 2 in 10 students globally.” Central Asia is the largest source of international students, with China, India, and Korea the top sending countries from this part of the world. The top destination countries are the United States (18%), the United Kingdom (11%), and France (7%).

The increase in international students follows several worldwide trends, including specific, differentially perceived postsecondary educational experiences and the increased globalization opportunities associated with them. Specifically, in 2009 and 2010, the Institute of International Education conducted a survey of over 9,000 prospective study abroad students in four major sending regions (including India, Brazil, United Kingdom, and South Africa) and found that 76% of the respondents agreed with statements suggesting that the United States offers a higher quality higher education system than do their home countries (Chow, 2011).

In addition, international experience plays a significant role in the education and future employment opportunities of many students. In 2008, Phil Gardner, Linda Gross, and Inge Steglize, for the Collegiate Employment Research Institute, reported that more than 45% of employers surveyed in the United States found that recent hires with international experience stood out and excelled beyond their peers in

areas of understanding cultural differences in the workplace; interacting with people who hold different interests, values, or perspectives; adapting to situations of change; and so forth. According to Gardner et al. (2008), many employers around the world cite the ability to speak a second language and experience abroad as preferred qualifications for prospective hires.

Although some students can afford to study abroad through family funding or scholarships to experience general personal and professional growth, others receive funding to pursue a foreign education for very specific purposes. For example, the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission to the U.S. (2013) sponsors students to study in a field that meets economic or social needs of Saudi Arabia. Many advisors work with students in majors that require or strongly encourage a study abroad experience before graduation.

### Value of International Education

Internationalization in higher education presents a myriad of benefits as well as obstacles that affect universities worldwide. On the positive side, meaningful interactions between domestic and international students can offer lifelong benefits to participants and the campus culture. In a Duke University study of survey data from 5,675 former students, researchers found that students who had substantial engagement with peers from abroad related well to people from different backgrounds, were better at “synthesizing and integrating ideas and information,” and were “also more likely than their peers to question their own, and society’s, beliefs” (Fischer, 2013, ¶6–7). U.S. students can develop this positive relationship when interacting with international students on their home campus or in study abroad situations overseas.

However, on the negative side, college campuses must determine and apply the best ways to integrate international students from many dissimilar nations so that both domestic and incoming students can create and benefit from meaningful interactions. To contribute positively to the challenges imposed by a changing student dynamic, including the impact created by the influx of international students and increased interest of domestic advisees in study abroad programs, advisors need to increase their cultural competency.

### Five Questions

Due to the current state and projected growth of internationalization in postsecondary institutions, educators must prepare for working with students from environments different from those in which they were raised. In chapter 10, Karen Archambault suggests that advisors can address five questions to gain practical cultural competency. Both new and seasoned advisors can apply Archambault’s questions to their conversations with international students.

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

Few similarities characterize most U.S. advisors and international students. Advisors with direct experience as international or study abroad students may share some experiences with advisees from overseas, but those without any international experience may need to settle on improving visualization about life in another country by taking college-level courses that increase understanding and improve communications, such as a second language class.

Although often open and flexible to new encounters, international students will experience culture shock, language difficulties, and homesickness while navigating through a new education system on an unfamiliar campus. Therefore, advisors should strive for empathy and picture themselves in the students' situations. As advisors study other countries and consider the challenges of their advisees, they can increase their cultural competence by keeping the following questions in mind:

- How might I react to living in a place where communication is a constant struggle?
- How might I internalize separation from family or friends for an extended period of time?

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

When working with international students, advisors quickly recognize the cultural customs or norms that differ from the domestic U.S. experience, but they also discern that they cannot possibly know all of the different ways people interact around the world nor assume that stereotypical generalizations will provide either appropriate or helpful guidance. For example, many Chinese international students come to the United States with an unclear understanding that plagiarism, as defined by Western standards, carries severe punishment in U.S. institutions, but this generality does not mean that all international Chinese students copy and paste their research papers (Galinova & Giannetti, 2014).

Although advisors must recognize differing general cultural viewpoints and practices (e.g., U.S. professors consider sharing homework answers dishonest behavior, not examples of cooperation and helpfulness), each international student presents individual perspectives and experiences, and the advisor must take time to learn about each student's home country and each individual's attitudes toward them. They can use the following questions to drive an inquiry about the experiences that shape their students' current worldview:

- What are some traditional holidays and why are they significant?
- What was it like to attend school in \_\_\_\_\_?

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

The experiences of international students uniquely vary from those of domestic students on campus. Those new to the United States present different needs and expectations, making them inherently unlike the American cohort. Therefore, new advisors should gain familiarity with areas that do not apply to citizens, such as basic immigration policies; for example, they need to know that international students cannot enter the United States more than 30 days prior to the start of the semester. With understanding of this law, advisors appreciate that incoming international students must assimilate very quickly to a new home and culture before classes start and will realize their international advisees benefit from connections to campus student organizations that put them in touch with students from their home region or country. Advisors also need to introduce them to domestic students, and those who have traveled to the international students' home countries, in particular, may serve as effective peer mentors.

### **What Student Characteristics Contribute to Academic Successes or Challenges?**

Advisors can effectively address student characteristics applied to education by looking at the work of Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970/1990), who defined *cultural capital* as previously acquired knowledge necessary to successfully navigate in a particular environment. Bourdieu theorized that cultural capital may be reflected in different learning styles. For example, in American culture, educators profess and reward critical thinking and analytical reasoning. However, students from other regions, particularly in the East, may have been primarily taught the value of memorization and thus consider knowledge of a volume of information in detail more important and practical than the principles associated with Western thought (Galinova & Giannetti, 2014). In fact, some students may copy or duplicate important class material in memorizing it because they consider knowledge communal in nature and addition of their own original ideas as an expression of arrogance (Friedman, 2010, ¶8). This preference for memorization and humbleness often undergirds the problems with plagiarism experienced by Chinese international students, who have spent years memorizing, verbatim, to demonstrate the type of learning considered most appropriate in Chinese schools (Friedman, 2010; Galinova & Giannetti, 2014).

Advisors must remember that international students have developed their own cultural capital that they bring with them. Students' adaptability and demonstrated respect for the cultures and norms of others exemplify the type of competency that domestic students can emulate. In fact, these contributions from international students have inspired colleges and universities to recruit them as a means of engendering diversity on campus.

Advisors play a role in enriching learning for all students and promoting cross-cultural interactions of international and domestic students. The idealized campus includes internationalization that does not involve students necessarily leaving campus to study abroad; instead, the educational system increasingly capitalizes on international students' prior experiences.

Consistent with these goals for internationalization for domestic students, advisors must assist advisees who possess relatively little cultural capital by giving them the necessary tools to improve their academic skills. Even the least experienced advisors can contribute to this goal by determining the type of information and learning style that fits each student and situation. Specifically, they can encourage international students to take classes that promote academic skills such as critical thinking and analysis. Once students have acquired these attributes for success in their new institution, they will be able to demonstrate their own cultural capital in the classroom setting.

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

Karen Doss Bowman (2012), in an article on integrating international students into the university campus, stated that despite specific goals set by college administrators, meaningful interactions between domestic and international students remain relatively rare. To foster growth of all students, she recommended cross-cultural training for advisors, efficient transfer agreements between U.S. and international institutions, employment of bilingual counselors, and establishment of living-learning communities that encourage exchange between international and domestic students. To this end, advisors can ask superiors or colleagues the following questions to identify units with effective practices that benefit international students:

- Which departments offer clear transfer agreements with international institutions?
- Where can advisors find on-campus bilingual counselors or translators?

In addition to learning about existing resources, advisors need to collaborate with those in well-developed programs to familiarize themselves with the specific issues of international students on campus. They also need to take advantage of offerings, such as work-life educational workshops and lectures, that prepare advisors as good global citizens. NACADA offers a myriad of resources such as webinars, articles, and the Global Engagement Commission for advisors seeking to learn about international students and study abroad benefits. Advisors who attend regional and national conferences to learn and present about experiences with international students, proven programs, and ways to integrate study abroad into major curricula contribute to the promotion of the internationalization that best prepares students for the globalized world.

## Summary

The shrinking global community demands that students embrace internationalization in higher education. As a result, academic advisors must move away from a service-oriented role to adopt that of a teacher (NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising [NACADA], 2006), and they need to do it consistently with pedagogy critical to advising. As stated in the Preamble of the Introduction to the NACADA Concept of Academic Advising (NACADA, 2006),

Academic advising is integral to fulfilling the teaching and learning mission of higher education. Through academic advising, students learn to become members of their higher education community, to think critically about their roles and responsibilities as students, and to prepare to be educated citizens of a democratic society and a global community. Academic advising engages students beyond their own world views, while acknowledging their individual characteristics, values, and motivations as they enter, move through, and exit the institutions. (¶7)

Because of international student mobility and the ever-increasing demands to produce informed and critically aware citizens, advisors must equip themselves to educate unique student populations. The learning process necessary for this endeavor will benefit not just advisees but new and seasoned advisors alike.

## Aiming for Excellence

- Meet with an advisor in international programs to learn about the populations coming to campus: the top sending countries, the most popular majors, and the extent to which web sites or other public offerings are translated for parents.
- Familiarize yourself with immigration processes, regulations, and documents.
- Attend any workshop or presentation about information on international students and their home cultures.
- Identify international student organizations on campus and participate in their cultural activities and events.
- Research top majors for international students on your campus to see if they offer resources designed to help international students; for example, do they train and select international peer mentors or offer writing assistance?
- Ask admissions and the registrar about the application of international transfer credits and any transfer agreements in place for specific countries and international universities.
- Take advantage of NACADA and other advising resources. Read *Academic Advising Today* and NACADA Clearinghouse articles on international students. Join the Global Engagement Facebook page, and attend presentations on international students at regional and annual conferences.

- Ask international students about their experiences on campus. Specifically inquire about key events and situations: orientation, availability and accessibility of contact personnel in international programs, and level of connection on campus. Obtain their suggestions for improving their U.S. college experience. Share constructive feedback with those in a position to enact change.

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