

Appreciative Advising with International Students in American Community Colleges

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INTRODUCTION

International students in US higher education have received greater attention in the past decades as their enrollment continues to grow. According to the *Open Doors* report, during academic year 2013–2014, the total enrollment of international students in US higher education reached an all-time record of 886,664, of which 87,963 (10 %) attended Baccalaureate/Associate's Colleges and Associate's Colleges (Institute of International Education 2014). This important student population has benefited US higher education in many different ways, such as bringing a global perspective to domestic students who cannot afford to study abroad (Campbell 2012), and providing additional revenue to higher education institutions as public funds continue to diminish (NAFSA 2015).

Despite the benefits, international students often face many barriers when navigating through US higher education. They may have low English proficiency, are unfamiliar with the US culture, and lack financial support (Mori 2000; Hsieh 2007). They may also have a difficult time understanding college requirements due to limited exposure to the community college concept, since it mainly exists in North America (Cohen et al. 2014).

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Although the difficulties international students experience pose new challenges to both students and institutions, the current discussion is often focused on issues of international students' adaptation and acculturation, and portrays them as problems and less capable (Mestenhauser 1983; Lee and Rice 2007; Charles-Toussaint and Crowson 2010). More attention should be given to how institutions could better respond to international students' needs and to maximize their learning outcomes.

Among all the available students' services on campus, this chapter selected academic advising because it is "perhaps the only structured campus endeavor that can guarantee students sustained interaction with a caring and concerned adult" who can assist them with a meaningful learning experience (Hunter and White 2004, p. 21). Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to discuss how academic advisors could better help international community college students achieve such an experience. Specifically, this chapter focuses on the Appreciative Advising model because it is "a powerful tool for building rapport with students, discovering their strengths, unleashing their hopes and dreams, and devising plans to make those hopes and dreams come true" (Hutson and Bloom 2007, p. 4). Adapting the Appreciative Advising model, it is expected that community colleges could develop a more welcoming and enriching environment for international students.

This chapter was developed based on a thorough examination of existing literature regarding the development of academic advising in US higher education and particularly the practice of academic advising in community colleges. It then focuses on the significance of academic advising to students' learning outcomes in community colleges, followed by discussions of challenges of international students. Next, the chapter elaborates the Appreciative Advising model and how it can help academic advisors better assist international students in a community college setting. Finally, recommended actions are provided for academic advisors as well as community colleges to improve their practice of advising international students.

ACADEMIC ADVISING IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Academic advising has been viewed as an integral part of student success in community colleges. It was traditionally offered by faculty members in academic departments in four-year universities (O'Banion 1972). Community colleges were encouraged to adopt this faculty-only model in the 1960s, but O'Banion (1972) acknowledged unique characteristics of community colleges and proposed a five-stage model, which altered the

world of academic advising and initiated conversations of the professionalization of the field in US higher education (Tuttle 2000).

With the development of academic advising, the faculty-only model has declined nationally across US institutions. According to the 2011 NACADA National Survey of Academic Advising, the faculty-only model was employed at 17.1 % of all institutions surveyed and only 8.8 % among two-year colleges. The most popular model used in two-year colleges was shared-split (39.3 %), where faculty and professional advisors share responsibilities, followed by self-contained (32.6 %), where advising is predominately offered by professional advisors (Carlstrom 2013).

Academic advising in the community college context is ever-challenging. Community colleges have a long history of attracting students with diverse backgrounds, such as transfers, adult learners, disabled, paraprofessional, honors, international, and student athletes (Cohen et al. 2014). Unlike four-year universities, which normally employ different personnel for different aspects of advising, advisors in community colleges often have to serve multiple roles responding to students' diverse demands (Jordan 2000; Tuttle 2000). This can be attributed to a lack of sustainable funding, resources, and trained personnel in community colleges (King 2002).

With limited resources, advisors in community colleges are normally responsible for a large number of advisees. The ratio of students to academic advisors or counselors averaged 1000 to 1, and, on some campuses, the ratio was as high as almost 2000 to 1 (MDRC 2010; Cohen et al. 2014). This indicates that many students in community colleges have limited access to advising sessions, if they are not totally excluded (Cohen et al. 2014).

Academic Advising and Community College Students' Success

According to NACADA (2003), academic advising is “a planning process” that aims to teach students “to understand the meaning of higher education, ... to understand the purpose of the curriculum,” and to enhance “students' intellectual and personal development toward academic success and lifelong learning” (n.p.). A large body of literature (Frost 2000; Habley 2004; Hunter and White 2004; Campbell and Nutt 2008; Bai and Pan 2009) demonstrates that academic advising, when done well, is positively associated with students' satisfaction, involvement, retention, and graduation. However, the majority of these studies were conducted in four-year universities and only a few (Seidman 1991; Flaga 2006; Bahr 2008) investigated academic advising in a community college context.

Academic advising in community colleges has positive linkage to students' persistence and retention. For instance, Seidman (1991) found that a higher percentage of community college students, who received advising before and after admissions, persisted in the program compared to those who only attended the traditional orientation program. Academic advising is also beneficial for students in remediation courses and transfer process. Bahr (2008) used data from 107 community colleges in California and claimed that receiving academic advising increased students' likelihood of remediating successfully in math and benefited students' long-term progress, including transferring to a four-year institution. Bahr also indicated that academic advising was more beneficial for underprepared students than their college-ready counterparts. In a more recent study of community college students pursuing transfer-based programs in (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) STEM fields, Packard and Jeffers (2013) found that both advisors' knowledge and personal relationships with advisees were key to students' success in transfer. The students received critical information about transfer and were exposed to new knowledge or opportunities that they were originally unaware of.

Regardless of the significance of academic advising to community college students' success, many chose not to use advising services. According to the 2014 Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) (2014), almost one-third of the students (32 %) *rarely or never* used academic advising services (n.d.). What these students missed is not just receiving course information, but more importantly, they failed to utilize the opportunity to enhance their learning experience for themselves. This may indicate there is a need to further investigate factors that prevent community college students from fully engaging themselves with academic advising, and to adopt more efficient advising strategies to encourage community college students to seek advisement.

Challenges Facing International Students

Prior research (Yi et al. 2003) suggested that international students experience challenges in US higher education primarily in academic studies, physical health, finances and tuition, employment after graduation, and personal and social issues. Numerous researchers (Yeh and Inose 2003, Andrade 2006) emphasized the importance of English proficiency to students' academic success and social adjustment. International students

are often found to be unclear with writing technique and challenged with academic writing (Angelova and Riazantseva 1999). Additionally, international students tend to experience more homesickness and loneliness (Kegel 2009), and have more mental health concerns than their American counterparts (Kwon 2009). Although mostly conducted in four-year universities, the existing literature sheds light on the similarity of experiences that international students may encounter on community college campuses.

The review of the relevant literature suggests that the research on international students to date primarily outlined students' adjustment issues and implied that these students are deficient. Consequently, US colleges and universities emphasize that international students have to adapt, adjust, or assimilate themselves to the US culture and assume that the international students should take major responsibility for improvement (Perrucci and Hu 1995; Lee and Rice 2007). More than 30 years ago, Mestenhauser (1983) claimed that international students provide an important, yet convenient and low-cost resource for intercultural education and training on many US campuses, although this resource was normally overlooked or underused. In fact, many international students were perceived as "handicapped" or "deficient" due to low English proficiency and/or lack of academic preparation (p. 164). Unfortunately, negative perceptions about international students still exist on many campuses in recent years. For instance, Beoku-Betts (2004) suggested that international students may experience purposeful or unintentional marginalization in US colleges and universities. Lee and Rice (2007) revealed that international students confronted insults both in and outside the classroom by peers, faculty, and members of local community.

It is apparent that a more welcoming and enriching learning environment should be created on college campuses for international students. However, the challenge is to change the deficient view of key personnel across campus, such as academic advisors whose impact is critical to students' learning experiences. To make such changes means adapting advising strategies that recognize students' strengths and capabilities. This chapter introduces Appreciative Advising as a possible solution because this advising model is fully student centered and shows great promise in helping international students and other student subpopulations achieve academic success.

APPRECIATIVE ADVISING

Appreciative Advising, initiated by Bloom and colleagues (Bloom and Martin 2002; Bloom et al. 2008), was defined as “a social-constructivist advising philosophy that provides an advising framework for advisors to use in optimizing their interactions with students in both individual and group settings” (Bloom et al. 2008, p. 19). Appreciative Advising is not about being mindlessly happy or ignoring problems; rather, it helps “students optimize their educational experiences and achieve their dreams, goals, and potentials” (Bloom et al. 2007, p. 28).

Appreciative Advising tenets were developed primarily based on Appreciative Inquiry, which is an organizational change theory that “provides a positive rather than a problem-oriented lens on the organization, focusing members’ attention on what is possible rather than what is wrong” (van Buskirk 2002, p. 67). It consists of four major concepts: Discover, Dream, Design, and Destiny. Based on the cycles, Appreciative Advising developed two more stages, which are Disarm and Don’t Settle, and renamed the Destiny stage to Delivery to better represent the practice of academic advisement as a process.

Together, the six steps of Appreciative Advising clearly delineate a process of academic advising that focuses on students’ strength and potential. More specifically, the first phase, Disarm, recognizes the importance of first impressions. During this phase, advisors attempt to establish a positive relationship using both verbal and non-verbal tools, such as greeting, being respectful, making eye contact, and smiling. During the Discover phase, advisors and students are expected to build rapport and work together to discover students’ strengths, passions, and skills. The third phase, Dream, is about discovering students’ dreams and hopes. During the Design phase, advisors and students work collaboratively on planning that can realize students’ dreams. Next, students carry out their plans during the Deliver phase. The last phase is about students’ continual development. Students are challenged and encouraged to pursue their fullest potential (Bloom et al. 2008).

Appreciative Advising has been used on many university campuses and applied to diverse student populations. For instance, in the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, the Appreciative Advising model led to an 18 % increase in the retention rate of first-time probation students and a statistically significant increase in GPA (Hutson and Bloom 2007). Researchers (Bloom et al. 2008) also found that adult learners in Eastern

Illinois University, with online or on-campus Appreciative Advising, were well satisfied with their degree programs, curriculum, and the quality of advising. The advisors also had a higher level of satisfaction with their job.

Although the research (Hutson and Bloom 2007; Bloom et al. 2008; Hall 2008) primarily highlighted its benefits for non-traditional students' academic studies, Appreciative Advising can likewise lead to similar positive outcomes for international students, since these students often share similar characteristics with and relate their college experiences to non-traditional students. Instead of using a problem-oriented lens, the Appreciative Advising model encourages advisors to emphasize international students' potential and to value their prior experiences. This approach could also motivate international students to appreciate their own strengths and to develop a meaningful educational career for themselves.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGE ADVISORS

This section discusses how Appreciative Advising techniques could be applied to international community college students. Recommendations for academic advisors as well as community colleges are provided in each phase of the Appreciative Advising model.

Disarm Phase

The purpose of the Disarm phase is to make a positive first impression with students and create a welcoming environment to put students at ease. Advisors are encouraged to have conversations with students about their home countries, past experiences, interests and hobbies, academic goals, and other aspect of their lives. Advisors are also encouraged to share their own information with the students (Bloom et al. 2008).

It is sometimes easier for advisors to establish a positive first impression and to quickly build a good advisor-advisee relationship with domestic community college students, who are mostly from the local communities. However, it can be challenging to establish such a relationship with international students because they usually have a wide diversity of personal, cultural, and political backgrounds. To successfully engage these students in conversations, advisors need to have at least minimal understanding of cultural differences. For instance, a handshake is normally seen as a sign of warm welcome in the USA, but it may be considered inappropriate by some Islamic female students if a male advisor extends his hand for a shake

(Haddad and Lummis 1987). Moreover, in some Asian cultures, bowing is more widely used as a greeting gesture than handshaking (Matsumoto and Hwang 2013). Pronunciation of international students' names can be challenging, but it is important in establishing a positive first impression (Rhee and Sagaria 2004). Advisors could practice the pronunciation of the student's name prior to the meeting, ask the student to pronounce it during advising, or at least show interest in learning it correctly.

International students in community colleges are usually unclear about importance of academic advising in their academic success and unaware of available advising resources on campus (Upcraft and Stephens 2000; Zhang 2015; 2016). To have a better introduction, academic advisors need to introduce their responsibilities to international students during their first meetings and explain what they *can* and *cannot* do for the students. Equipped with sufficient knowledge about academic advising, international students would be more likely to use advising services in their time at the community college.

Discover Phase

The Discover phase focuses on building rapport with students and collaborating with them to discover their strengths, passions, and skills through asking positive, open-ended questions. Bloom et al. (2008) developed the Appreciative Advising Inventory to guide academic advisors through the Discover phase. The following are some examples of questions advisors might ask during advising sessions (pp. 44–45):

- Tell me a story about a time you positively impacted another person's life.
- Who are your two biggest role models? Why are they role models to you and what about them do you hope to emulate?
- What were you doing the last time you lost track of time? When time just flew by and you looked up at the clock and thought it must be wrong?

Specifically for international students, questions about their home country and transition can be asked to guide them to share more about their stories:

- Tell me about your journey to America.
- What challenges did you overcome to study in the USA?

- Tell me about a time you felt most proud to be from your home country (Palmer 2009, para. 10).

The researchers (Bloom et al. 2008) also suggested that advisors make encouraging comments and use positive follow-up questions to probe detailed responses.

Given the fact that many international students on community college campuses are English-as-a-second language (ESL) learners, academic advisors need to be more thoughtful about the use of jargons and slang terms (Zhang 2015; 2016). Academic advisors could confirm with the students by repeating, summarizing, or paraphrasing the statements made by international students (Palmer 2009). To overcome language barriers, academic advisors can encourage international students to tell their stories through drawing, painting, photos, or other forms of art. It has been confirmed (Howie et al. 2013) that art-based consulting and therapy is more helpful to explain one's experience when verbal expression is insufficient.

Unlike those in four-year institutions, many international students in community colleges have not yet claimed a specific major; many are still exploring their potentials. To fully uncover these students' strengths, academic advisors must avoid stereotypical views about international students, which could severely hinder the advisors from understanding the students' true abilities.

Dream Phase

In this phase, advisors and students work together to identify hopes and dreams for the future. Advisors use open-ended questions to guide students in imagining and detailing their ambitions (Bloom et al. 2008). Example questions include the following:

- Imagine that you are on the front cover of a magazine 20 years from now. The article details your latest and most impressive list of accomplishments. What is the magazine? Why have you been selected to appear on the cover? What accomplishments are highlighted in the article?
- When you were approximately nine years old someone asked you, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" what was your answer? What is your answer to that question now?

- Twenty years from now, what will your ideal work day be like? (Bloom et al. 2008, pp. 56–57)

Academic advisors need to understand that dreams are often private, personal, and kept secret. Without a trust relationship, dreams might not be easily shared by international students. Researchers (Cornett-DeVito and Reeves 1999; Zhang 2015) have found that advisors are more likely to establish a trust relationship with the students when they have richer intercultural experiences, such as studying abroad, traveling overseas, and participating in classes or other activities improving intercultural understanding. Thus, academic advisors should be encouraged to step out of their comfort zones and to obtain more knowledge in cross-cultural understanding through personal experiences or professional training (Clark and Kalionzes 2008).

Additionally, academic advisors should avoid being judgmental and be cognizant of their own bias and underlying prejudice. If international students sensed their experiences were undervalued or their achievements were not recognized, they would not open themselves up to discuss their dreams.

Design Phase

Once students' strengths are identified and articulated, advisors and students move to the Design phase. Students and advisors continue working together to develop a clear plan where the students' strengths and abilities can be used to realize the students' dreams. Advisors should encourage students to take actions and refer them to campus resources when necessary (Bloom et al. 2008). Example questions are:

- What can you do today that will bring you one step closer to your goal?
- What can you do this week (month, semester) that will get you started?
- Who and what resources can help your dream become reality? (Howell 2010, p. 26)

This phase can be challenging for students at all levels because it requests detailed plans and specific steps, but it could be even more difficult for international community college students since they are often

unfamiliar with campus resources. For instance, some international community college students aim to gain a bachelor's degree, but do not know where and who on campus they should go to for guidance. Advisors may need to iterate the transfer process, such as what courses are transferrable, if there are any articulation agreements between the current community college and their target four-year institutions, what materials are needed for transfer, and when they need to apply for admissions. A timeline of transfer needs to be clearly and carefully planned, because if international students fail to transfer but have graduated from a community college, they may lose their legal status in the USA, which could lead to limited or no career and/or education opportunities.

Knowledge of immigration is another important component in developing plans for international students who plan to enter the workforce in the USA immediately after they graduate from community college occupational programs (Clark and Kalionzes 2008).

Oftentimes, these students do not have much knowledge about immigration regulations and how they can successfully obtain a legal working status. To better guide these students to realize their plans, advisors should at least know who and where they can refer these students to, when appropriate.

To provide students with information necessary to form their plans in a time-efficient manner, community colleges could create a “one-stop” service through collaborating with other professionals who work with international students on campus, such as international admission officers, multicultural center administrators, and international students' organization leaders. This collaboration can also benefit community colleges financially. Serving as an entity through which other student services are realized, academic advising can maximize various services available in community colleges without requiring new staff (O'Banion 1972).

Deliver Phase

The focus of this phase is to implement the plan that students designed with guidance of advisors to achieve their goals. The advisors continue guiding students to “revise, modify, and prioritize the plan” through positive feedback and active listening (Bloom et al. 2008, p. 96). Students may make mistakes, but advisors are there to help them to regroup and start over again. The following questions are examples that can be used to explore obstacles or resistances:

- What roadblocks have you hit? How are you dealing with them?
- Since our last meeting, what concrete steps have you taken to achieve your goals?
- What have you learned so far? (Howell 2010, p. 27)

Compared with American students, international students, especially those from Asia, tend to view advisors as authorities and may be afraid of talking about mistakes that they made during plan implementation or asking for additional assistance to revise their plans (McMahon 2011). Academic advisors should reassure international students of their capability, remind them of their goals and dreams, and continue emphasizing hope for the future. Advisors could also make follow-up sessions with international students and reiterate that they are expected to return to the advising office for help if they encounter any obstacles (Palmer 2009).

Advisors could also organize small group discussions among international community college students who speak the same language or those from a similar cultural background. Consequently, international students could feel more comfortable revealing their resistance in implementing their plans and feel more supported through peer advising (Diambra and Cole-Zakrzewski 2002).

Don't Settle Phase

This is the final step but it is designed to lead to the beginning of the next cycle: improvement or accomplishment in one area leads to another. Advisors continue to motivate students to think beyond their initial plans, to dream about something bigger and better, and to identify new plans that can realize their greater ambitions (Bloom et al. 2008).

Celebration with international students on what they have achieved could be a huge motivation for the students, since most of their family and friends are thousands of miles away. A sense of belonging in the host culture could improve student retention, provide a feeling of inclusion, and encourage them to aim at new goals (Moores and Popadiuk 2011; O'Keeffe 2013).

This is also the time for academic advisors to reevaluate opinions, attitudes, and cultural understandings that they hold. Such examination could help advisors understand their own cultural heritage, worldviews,

and underlying assumptions, if any, about other cultures or nations. With understanding of their own biases and remaining open to diversity, academic advisors could better assist international students to achieve new success (Gudykunst 1993).

CONCLUSION

The enrollment of international students has been increasing in US community colleges over the past years (IIE 2014). It suggests that student support services must also grow to meet the demands of these students. International students face unique challenges when pursuing an educational career in the USA, but are often perceived as problems and expected to take major responsibilities to overcome their obstacles (Perrucci and Hu 1995; Mestenhauser 1983; Lee and Rice 2007). However, the literature of international community college students is limited in the ways that international students are understood, as well as how academic advising can be applied to respond to these students' needs and to guide them to overcome the challenges.

Appreciative Advising provides a five-step process that focuses on students' strengths and potentials in advising, but it is more than just a tool; it provides "a whole new way of thinking and of being" (Redfern 2008, conclusion session, para. 1). It provides a positive approach in advising international students in community colleges. Using the Appreciative Advising approach, academic advisors could play an important role in helping international students achieve success in community colleges and continue to influence their life journey even after they transfer to a four-year university. The practice of Appreciative Advising with international students should be encouraged on more community college campuses. However, to fulfill its potential, community college administrators need to provide more support for advisors; a critical one is to lower the student-advisor ratio. Appreciative advising requests the advisors to devote into a large amount of time to guide each individual student. With a high student-advisor ratio on many community college campuses, advisors might not have sufficient time to develop individual relationships with each student. Future researchers should conduct empirical studies to provide a fuller understanding of impact of Appreciative Advising on international community college students' success and its application for other underrepresented student populations.

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