

# Intercultural Communication Competence: Advising International Students in a Texas Community College

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*Academic advising has long been considered a critical factor to student success. With a qualitative, phenomenological research design, this study was undertaken to better understand the lived experiences of academic advisors in communicating with international students in a community college context. Intercultural communication competence was used as a multidimensional construct to guide data collection and analysis used to assess the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of academic advisors' experiences with international students. The findings of the study provide important information on academic advisors' knowledge, attitudes, motivation, and skills in communicating with international students and offer implications for practice, policy, and future research.*

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Academic advising has long been considered a critical factor to student success. Over decades, academic advising evolved from routine activities to a comprehensive practice that exerts a significant impact on students' motivation, involvement, retention, and personal development (Campbell & Nutt, 2008; Tuttle, 2000). All students benefit from advising regardless of their nationality and types of institutions they attend.

Like 4-year universities, U.S. community colleges continue to accommodate a large population of international students. During the 2013-2014 academic year, the total enrollment of international students in U.S. 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).

Despite the numbers enrolled in community colleges, issues of advising international students are seldom discussed during research and policy making. Although a tremendous amount of research on international students addresses stu-

dents' adjustment to college (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011; Kegel, 2009; Lee & Rice, 2007), little has been published about academic advisors' experiences of advising international students in community colleges. As a consequence, much remains unexplored, such as advisors' understanding and knowledge about cultural diversity, attitude toward different cultures, or ability to communicate effectively and overcome advising challenges with international students. Therefore, this qualitative, phenomenological study presents one of the first efforts to offer a description of the lived experiences of community college academic advisors interacting with international students.

## Literature Review

Since the early 1970s, academic advising has emerged as an important profession in U.S. higher education (Tuttle, 2000). Numerous researchers (Chickering & Gamson, 1999; Frost, 1991; Glennen & Vowell, 1995; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993) have demonstrated a positive association between effective advising and college students' success, involvement, retention, and graduation. As the college student population becomes increasingly diverse, scholars and practitioners have demonstrated an increasing interest in multicultural issues (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992). The literature shows that lack of multicultural understanding can undermine communication (Locke, 1998; Martin & Nakayama, 2010; Simon & Kodish, 2005). For instance, researchers (Sue & Sue, 1990) indicated that misinterpretations and conflicts in counseling can be attributed to different cultural backgrounds. However, most of the multicultural studies focus on U.S.-born ethnic minority students and may not be directly applicable to international students' experiences in the United States.

## Advising International Students

Numerous researchers (Charles-Toussaint & Crowson, 2010; Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011; Lee & Rice, 2007; Sato & Hodge, 2009; Yeh & Inose, 2002) have pointed out that international students in U.S. colleges and universities bring distinct challenges to academic advisors unlike those

associated with ethnic minority students born in the United States. For example, international students may encounter difficulties in learning English (Sawir, 2005), experience conflicts between U.S. and home cultures (Sodowsky & Plake, 1992), face challenges in adjusting to sex-role expectations (Hayes & Lin, 1994), feel homesickness and loneliness (Kegel, 2009), and harbor concerns about mental health (Mori, 2000).

Because of the variety of issues presented by international students, advisors are encouraged to reach out to them on a frequent basis with full awareness of the unique matters confronting them (Hunter & Kendall, 2011). Priest and McPhee (2000) admonished that advisors must neither show bias about distinct cultural values nor view international students as deficient. They can gain trust and understanding by showing an interest and asking questions about a students' home culture (Clark & Kalionzes, 2008).

#### Advising Community College Students

Unlike many 4-year institutions, numerous community colleges adopt a self-contained model in which advising is provided in a centralized office or center (King, 2002). Previous researchers (Bahr, 2008; Flaga, 2006; Townsend & Wilson, 2006) found that academic advising benefits a variety of community college students, who can be identified as nontraditional on multiple measures including age, ethnicity, educational goals, preparedness, and work responsibilities as well as first-generation and socioeconomic status. Working with such a diverse student population can create additional challenges for academic advisors and requires sensitivity to the factors that may negatively affect students' academic performance (King, 2002; Sanford-Harris, 1993; Tuttle, 2000).

The review of the literature revealed the lack of research on advising international students within the community college context. It also demonstrated a need to further invest in understanding international students and advance advisors' awareness, knowledge, and ability to undertake intercultural communication with international students in community colleges. Without sufficient knowledge of advisors' experiences and a clear understanding of their challenges, those training academic advisors may not offer programming that leads to productive advising and communication with international students in the 2-year institution.

#### Theoretical Framework

Quality advising depends on effective communication (Harrison, 2009; Heisserer & Parette, 2002). Communication between advisors and advisees can support and facilitate students' learning, but it can potentially impede their academic success as well (Knox, Schlosser, Pruitt, & Hill, 2006), which relies heavily on the quality of the communication. Advisors must exhibit skills in interpersonal relationships and intercultural communication when interacting with nonnative speakers from different cultures. To guide the analysis of the data on communication of international students and academic advisors, I used the intercultural communication competence model (as per Chen & Starosta, 1996).

Intercultural communication is typically described as communication between people from different ethnic groups or cultures (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005; Gudykunst, 2002). It "occurs whenever a person from one culture sends a message to be processed by a person from a different culture" (Samovar, Porter, McDaniel, & Roy, 2014, p. 7). Correspondingly, *intercultural communication competence* refers to one's ability to conduct meaningful, appropriate, and effective communication with others of different cultural backgrounds (Chen & Starosta, 1996; Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003; Pope & Reynolds, 1997). Intercultural communication competence consists of three closely related but separate dimensions: cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects. A communicator is unlikely to demonstrate competent intercultural communication if he or she lacks ability in any of the three dimensions (Wiseman, 2002).

The cognitive aspect is represented by one's awareness and understanding of information or actions needed for intercultural communication (Chen & Starosta, 1998/1999; Wiseman, 2002). The affective dimension is represented by motivation, which refers to "the set of feelings, intentions, needs, and drives associated with the anticipation of or actual engagement in intercultural communication" (Wiseman, 2002, p. 211). The behavioral dimension refers to skills and ability needed to conduct effective and appropriate communication in an intercultural context (Chen & Starosta, 1998/1999).

The framework of intercultural communication competence has been used in higher education, but most of the research focused on international students' understanding and ability to communicate. For instance, Zimmermann (1995) assessed

international students' perceptions of intercultural communication competence and adaptation in U.S. higher education institutions. Campbell (2012) evaluated international students' adjustment to a New Zealand university and sought to determine whether the students' intercultural communication competence was improved through pairings with native students.

Despite the value of these studies, the way individuals in the host culture interact with newcomers from unfamiliar cultures needs attention. Understanding the views and practices of natives may prove particularly important for advisors whose ability to conduct effective intercultural communication directly relates to the quality of international students' experiences and satisfaction on campus. Therefore, in this study, I primarily focus on academic advisors and use the framework of intercultural communication competence to guide data collection and analysis.

### Methodology

A phenomenological research design was used to explore lived experiences (as per Creswell, 2014) of international student advising as described by academic advisors on a multicampus community college in Texas. The study was conducted at the North Urban College (NUC) (a pseudonym) during the 2013-2014 academic year. NUC was chosen as the research site because enrollments are among the highest of all institutions in Texas and include a relatively large international student population. In Fall 2013, NUC enrolled approximately 50,000 students of whom nearly 400 were classified as international. The following research question guided the study: "How do academic advisors describe their experiences in advising international students in NUC?"

### Participant Selection and Recruitment

I used purposeful sampling (as per Maxwell, 2005) to select full-time academic advisors as participants who specifically fit the parameters of the study. In addition, full-time counselors who served part of the time as academic advisors to international students were invited to participate in the study. Of the 49 academic advisors and counselors invited, 20 volunteered to participate in the study. The majority of the participants were female, aged from mid-twenties to early fifties, and represented a diverse background. Three of the 20 participants held the title of counselor, but their responsibilities included academic advising and they had cultivated rich experiences advising

international students. To protect the participants' identity, I applied pseudonyms, and regardless of their given title, I refer to all 20 as *academic advisors* or *advisors*.

### Data Collection and Analysis

I collected the primary data during individual, face-to-face interviews with the academic advisors. Each interview lasted approximately 50 to 90 minutes and consisted of open-ended, semi-structured questions focused primarily on the academic advisors' interactions with international advisees, their awareness of cultural differences, knowledge and skills for dealing with cultural diversity, and challenges of advising this population at NUC.

The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. I analyzed the data through open and axial coding to identify emerging themes, subthemes, and the relationships between them (as per Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I used intercultural communication competence as a guide for my analysis.

### Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, I collected data from a wide range of academic advisors who reported extensive experiences working with international students on all five NUC campuses. These professionals have been working in the college for a varying number of years and have diverse personal and professional backgrounds. Member checking (as per Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was conducted via verification of the recorded transcripts of advisor interviews; I also gave participants additional opportunities to edit their narratives via e-mail or through face-to-face meetings.

The member-checking process was followed by one-on-one, individual interviews with 11 international students studying at NUC. These students came from six different countries and represented diverse cultural backgrounds. They responded to questions about their college experiences in the United States, at NUC, and more specifically, with their academic advisors. I used the findings from the student interviews to triangulate the data collected from the academic advisors.

Finally, three external researchers with extensive experiences in investigating topics of academic advising, international education, and qualitative research methodology lent their expertise to me during debriefing. Conversations

with these experts helped enhance the credibility and quality of the study (as per Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Findings**

Through a careful, in-depth analysis, four key themes emerged from interviews with academic advisors at NUC: challenges in advising international students, awareness of cultural differences, attitudes toward learning other cultures, and strategies employed in advising international students. Each theme is supported with quotes from the participants and presented with subcategories that highlight the advising experiences of the academic advisors.

### **Challenges in Advising International Students**

The academic advisors in the study acknowledged the unique challenges that international students encounter at NUC. They reported low English proficiency, unfamiliarity with U.S. higher education, and difficulties in evaluating and transferring credits earned in home countries as the most prominent issues that confronted international students at NUC; these factors also complicate the processes of effective communication and provision of assistance and guidance to advisees.

**Low English proficiency.** Because many international students at NUC enrolled in English-as-a-second-language programs, academic advisors expressed the expected concerns over effectively communicating with international students from non-English speaking countries. For instance, Crystal indicated that language barriers significantly affected her experiences of advising international students:

Sometimes it's challenging to advise a student in a communication breakdown there; [the advisor is] having a hard time. [The student is] having a hard time understanding, and sometimes you feel helpless to know what to do to help a student that's having a hard time understanding.

Similar to Crystal, Kelly expressed deep concern about her effectiveness of disseminating information to international advisees. One of her students demonstrated difficulty understanding the course sequence in a nursing program and kept returning to her with the same or similar questions. Kelly's experience reveals that language barriers not only challenge international

students' learning at NUC but also add difficulties in navigating through NUC academic programs.

**Unfamiliarity with U.S. higher education.** Students' insufficient knowledge of U.S. higher education added more complications for NUC advisors, who often spent a large amount of time explaining general structures of U.S. higher education, such as differences between 4-year universities and community colleges, transfer processes between different types of institutions, and the ways academic advisors can help students. The academic advisors indicated that, coupled with language barriers, the need to explain the community college system and ways it can best facilitate learning required significant time before any specific advice could be given to the students. As Mandy described, the process could be "very overwhelming" and "draining." Betty also shared her thoughts on advising international students:

I think many of the international students . . . come in at a disadvantage because they have to learn the way this system is set up. In many countries, they may not have 2-year colleges, okay? In many countries, they may not have the same requirements. . . .

The transfer situation is unique to the U.S. community college and typically not fully understood by international students from a different education system. For example, Emily needed to explain the transfer function and ways the student could take advantage of it:

[The student] was so relieved to hear that she could complete courses here and then continue on without having to start at a university so soon and having to pay all the money so soon. So she was very relieved and happy about that.

**Credit recognition and transfer.** Many international students at NUC struggled to transfer credits obtained from institutions outside of the United States. They felt frustration because of the lengthy process and strict requirements on types of credits accepted at NUC. Alice shared her observation:

[International students] have taken courses in their home country and they're not being transferred here. . . . They're not looking at

those credits as equivalent credits so that's been burdensome for some students who have received degrees or who have taken classes elsewhere. . . .

Molly recalled scenarios similar to the one Alice described. Some of her international advisees held professional positions in their home countries, but despite their record of achievements, NUC failed to recognize their academic accomplishments. Molly commented that the students encountering such disappointment may experience particular difficulty adjusting:

I had one lady that was an English professor in her country, and they come here and then they have to just start completely over almost. You know, they don't get hardly any credit for the credits that they had in their country. And they have to deal with not only the language barrier, then learning a new system, but then the ego I'm sure.

### **Awareness of Cultural Differences**

All of the study participants recognized cultural differences, in varying degrees, in their interactions with international students. In particular, the advisors discussed cultural differences concerning gender and negotiations.

**Gender differences.** Defined by culture, the treatment of people by gender adds complexity to advising sessions with some international students. Specifically, many women from Middle Eastern countries came to advising meetings accompanied by a male family member, such as a father, brother, or husband. Furthermore, in many cases, the male relative commandeered the conversation. The male asked many questions on behalf of his female relative and made decisions for her. As a result, advisors struggled to understand the advisee's thoughts while trying not to offend or ignore the male holding the conversation. Maria shared her observation of Middle Eastern advisees she has advised:

A lot of times, women from Middle Eastern countries, they'll come in with their husbands or significant others and they [the men] tend to dominate the conversation. The woman will just sit there and not really say much even though they are the student.

In addition, NUC female advisors discussed difficulties in advising male students from certain cultures, citing a feeling of rejection during the communication, and they each handled the situation in different ways. For example, Tina indicated that when advising Caribbean male students she changes her tone to sound particularly assertive. Joy shared that she has employed the assistance of others when addressing male advisees from Iran, India, or Israel:

There have been a handful who simply don't want to listen to what I have to say or feel I don't know what I'm talking about because of my gender. And I've picked up on that, and I would call in a male colleague to come in and share the information the same way, and it was better received in that regard. It didn't offend me any. I understood it was a cultural thing.

Paige explained some challenges in communicating with male students from Uganda. Because she considers herself a "very shy person," she felt that she needed to accommodate her communication style to interact with this group of students:

The men are just very boisterous and very outgoing. And I have to not take that as a personal thing onto me, but that's just how they are. And so, I just have to be able to work with them and laugh with them and take it as it is.

**Negotiation.** Advisors noticed that international students from certain cultures try to negotiate courses and credit hours. Some returned to the same advisor several times to discuss the same questions. Linda recalled:

The students will come here and not really believe, I guess, that the policies that the institution has are really hard and firm. Some students will think, "Well, we can negotiate," or, "If I just come back every day and ask you the same question in a different way that somehow I will get a different answer."

Through these examples, the academic advisors demonstrated cognizance of cultural differences and had experienced difficulties advising culturally differed students.

### **Attitudes Toward Learning Other Cultures**

The advisors not only gained awareness of cultural differences but also appreciated opportunities to learn about other countries from their international advisees. In fact, almost all of the advisors stated that learning topped the reasons they enjoyed working with international students. For instance, Sarah loves talking to international students because their conversations motivate her to reconsider once-neglected facets of her everyday life. Similarly, Paige felt that communication with international students helped her learn about other parts of the world. She shared:

I love to learn about cultures, and so I'll ask questions about "How is this different in your country? Or how long have you been here?" I love however long people have been in America and how different they feel it is. . . . So I enjoy it a lot, because it gives me little pictures into the world I don't get to see.

Maria indicated that understanding cultural differences and knowing the unfamiliar environment that international students encounter in the United States made her "more of a humble person."

Mandy acknowledged the importance of culture and was mindful of the role that her own culture plays in advising international students:

Culture framed how we view the world, and so this person is coming, we all have culture. So I have my own culture that I'm bringing to the table as well as the student and for me . . . I'm always aware of my culture. . . .

In addition to learning about other cultures directly from international advisees, the academic advisors expressed their willingness to attend courses or participate in activities that can enrich their intercultural understanding and communication. Calvin addressed the need for academic advisors in the community college to learn about other cultures through professional training. Linda contended that U.S. higher education pays close attention to differences among American students but not enough on students from other countries. She believes advisors and other educational practitioners would benefit from additional training on international students at

NUC. Alice also stated that "all employees working with international students should go through diversity training . . . to inform them on best practices." The academic advisors in this study expressed an openness to learning about other cultures and showed interest in participating in diversity and intercultural training programs.

### **Strategies Employed in International Student Advising**

To overcome the challenges of advising international students, the academic advisors in the study employed a wide variety of strategies to engage advisees and maximize their learning outcomes. Being respectful, demonstrating great patience, showing empathy, and establishing relationships with international students emerged as the most important strategies that participating advisors used to advise international students.

**Respect.** Showing awareness of different cultures and respecting international students' decisions emerged as the most widely used strategy of participants advising international students. For example, Betty believes that respecting other cultures could narrow the gap between peoples and help advisors better serve students with diverse backgrounds. She commented, "All people want to be . . . accepted and heard . . . and respect[ed]. . . . And I think once we do that, it doesn't really matter what the culture is." When advising students who were constantly trying to convince her to bend rules, Linda understood this might be "a cultural thing" and responded to the repeated requests with respect and questions related to the students' home countries, such as "Hey, what was it like at home where you came from? . . . To get things to happen, how did you move forward when you needed to work with a large institution?" She also explained "how things might be different here and how they might be perceived."

Using cultural awareness and respect for differences, Laura cited the need to educate a very assertive female student from Africa, who wanted to take courses for which she was ineligible, about the curriculum policy:

I have to respect that part of her culture, and try to then say, "Okay. I see what you're saying, but let me show you this." And then, once I showed her not only on a paper, but I showed her on the computer—I pulled it up and I showed her. I said, "So, now that you see this, do you see why it would be important for you to take this developmental

class?” And she says, “Oh, yes.” . . . Because I have to realize I could just force the information on her, but she wouldn’t accept it. So, I had to go about it in a different way.

**Patience.** Laura demonstrated patience in offering an in-depth explanation to a demanding student, and other participants reported extending patience as an essential strategy for international student advising. The interviewees indicated that they need to show more patience with international students than their domestic student counterparts. For instance, Beth gave international students sufficient time to express themselves and describe their academic goals. Relying on multiple resources, Harry used as much time as necessary to explain rules and regulations that apply to NUC international students. Echoing Harry, Paige said that advisors should use a variety of tools to help international students, especially those with low English proficiency. She offered examples she often uses:

Draw pictures—I draw pictures all the time. Or draw tables to show. . . . You’ve just got to be patient. I think that’s the biggest thing, patience, because language barriers are difficult sometimes. And if you’re not patient, you just give up, and then you both lose.

**Empathy.** The participants often shared their own experiences in the process of advising international students. The self-disclosed information provides an environment where students may no longer feel alone as they experience empathetic support; for example, Tina shares her stories and advocates for students trying to navigate the often aggravating U.S. education system. When encountering international students irritated with the runaround, Betty passionately suggested,

We just have to slow down and let them say what they need to say, and listen to what they have to say, and then to try to redirect accordingly. And many times apologize. I find myself many times I will apologize. . . . Because when someone is frustrated and you can understand why they’re frustrated. If it were reversed and I were in another country trying to go through this process, I probably would feel frustration as well.

Claiming that advisors should put themselves in the students’ shoes, Kelly suggested academic advisors should not only be empathetic but also “figure out a way to explain things differently” when international students come back with identical questions. Kelly maintained that students gain little insight from repeated answers to repeated questions.

**Connection.** Advisors adopt a strategy of building connections with international students. To integrate this tactic into practice, advisors must first gain a deeper understanding about the international students’ needs and goals. Sarah shared that she always strives to view her students as unique individuals rather than general representatives of specific cultures, which helps her develop a rapport with each advisee. Creating an environment of trust and support, Adam reported that many international students returned to him for future advising. In a similar fashion, Alice established close relationships with numerous international students and indicated that many of them came back just to visit:

Like, it’s almost as if they’re coming in because they kind of want that just human bond, just coming in and saying “hey, how’s it going?” and seeing what’s going on with me and filling me in on everything that’s going on with them, but usually they do have at least one question about their academics or classes.

### Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be considered for those drawing conclusions from this study. First, intercultural communication competence continues without end as advisors improve their understanding and ability to conduct effective communication with international students. The data from the study were collected at one juncture, but the advisors’ perceptions of and experiences with advising international students may change such that the length of time working as an academic advisor may affect results. Second, although I did not assume international students as a homogenous group, I neither explored cultural differences among subgroups of the international student population nor examined ways advisors’ experiences may differ per specific culture.

The third potential limitation of the study is related to my own identity. As a former international student and a researcher of international

education, my presence and communication with the participants may have affected their responses to the interview questions; for example, the academic advisors may have altered their behavior and unintentionally provided more favorable information to me than they may have offered a researcher with a different background.

A fourth limitation of the study involves the sampling process. Although I invited every advisor experienced in advising international students to participate, perhaps a disproportionate number with favorable experiences volunteered to take part in this study. To limit the influence of my identity as well as the self-selection bias on data collection, I utilized students' interviews to ensure the findings likely reflected the advisors' lived experiences, and I conferred with peer researchers.

### **Discussion and Implications**

The study sheds light on experiences of academic advisors in communicating with international students in a community college context. Specifically, I used intercultural communication competence as a multidimensional construct to guide the analysis of community college advisors' experiences of interacting with international students. The assessment of the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of academic advisors' intercultural communication competence provides important information on their knowledge, attitudes, motivation, and skills in working with international students and suggests implications for practice, policy, and future research.

#### **Cognitive Aspect**

The findings of this study suggest that academic advisors in the community college understand that international students are confronted with unique sets of challenges, such as language barriers, limited knowledge about U.S. higher education, and difficulties in transferring credits earned from their home institutions. These obstacles hinder international student advising and advisor–advisee interactions. The interviewed advisors also expressed awareness that cultural differences added complexity, and sometimes difficulty, to the practice of advising international advisees.

The findings of the study indicate that understanding the types of challenges faced by international students helps academic advisors conduct effective communication and develop strategies for assisting students transitioning to the college and the culture. However, the study

results also imply that advisors were unfamiliar with educational systems in the students' home countries. None of the academic advisors discussed or provided examples regarding educational requirements in other countries nor did they indicate knowledge about the specific academic preparations of international advisees.

To advance their knowledge about international students, academic advisors can examine published statistics (e.g., from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization reports) on the quality of work and rigor offered by different academic systems. In addition to knowledge of students' academic preparation, advisors can strive to integrate students' goals of academic achievement, career development, and life desires in guiding international students (Allen & Smith, 2008).

#### **Affective Aspect**

With respect to the affective dimension of intercultural communication competence, the advisors interviewed for this study held a positive attitude toward other cultures and advisees from different nations. They were interested in learning about different cultures, open to opportunities for enhancing their intercultural understanding, and willing to take extra steps to improve their communication skills in a cross-cultural context. The findings also suggest that advisors recognized a lack of formal training on diversity and intercultural communication, and they called attention to the need to improve advising professionals' understanding of other cultures and ability to advise international students.

However, the majority of the participants did not report enforcing a plan for further education in intercultural understanding and communication. This may suggest that academic advisors need additional encouragement and time release to engage in training. Community colleges should make professional development opportunities accessible for academic advisors and consider incorporating cultural training as a part of their job responsibilities.

In addition, ideally with community college support, advisors may wish to obtain firsthand experiences in activities that enhance intercultural understanding, such as auditing courses on multiculturalism, attending conferences on international education, participating in international student organizations, and traveling abroad for business or for pleasure. Through their participation, academic advisors may gain a better

understanding about themselves as well as other cultures, beliefs, and values.

Community college administrators may want to create workshops or other professional development programs through which academic advisors can collaborate with other professionals who work closely with international students. Through teamwork with others in international programs, academic advisors can better address students' needs and refer them to other helpful resources when necessary. Through their contacts, academic advisors can advocate for international students as well as share their knowledge with education practitioners in other departments. Collaboration efforts elevate the voices of international students so they can be heard.

### **Behavioral Aspect**

The behavioral dimension of intercultural competence refers to the abilities and skills needed for effective and appropriate intercultural communications. The advisors in this study used multiple resources to overcome the challenges confronting the students as well as themselves. They provided both emotional and informational support to assist international students in navigating the U.S. community college. Specifically, when international advisees felt frustrated, the advisors demonstrated sincere concern and provided detailed information to explain unfamiliar processes and structures to students.

Despite their successes in communication with international students through trying circumstances, advisors developed strategies case by case. In other words, they relied entirely on their own knowledge, experiences, and motivation, which varied from one practitioner to another. This finding supports calls for training on procedures for avoiding misunderstandings and resolving conflicts with international students. Learning communities composed of academic advisors who share experiences and useful tips may also prove helpful.

In addition, the interviews with the academic advisors focused primarily on face-to-face communication and advising international students. None of the participants discussed using the Internet or other online tools to advise international students. However, many students, regardless of their nationalities and generations, rely on computers and the Internet for communication, social networking, information searching, online courses, and many other tasks in their daily lives (O'Hanlon, 2007).

Academic advisors may consider embracing both synchronous and asynchronous technology, including streaming video, advisors' personal web pages, and real-time chat rooms, to advance international students' experiences. As Jordan (2000) indicated, technology integrated into developmental advising practice allows advisors to provide both individualized attention and sources of information that advisees can access independently. Nonnative speakers, in particular, may benefit from use of a relaxing environment, where spoken English is not required, as created through Internet-based tools. International students could also spend additional time reading posts, responding to questions, and exploring information online at their own pace (McLoughlin, 1999). Technology makes information accessible to students and can serve as an alternate format that strengthens relationships between advisors and students.

Finally, academic advisors can incorporate empirical research into their daily practice of assisting students as well as developing advising programs. Research in academic advising and intercultural communication provides guidance to frontline practitioners. It can also broaden their understanding and enrich their knowledge of academic advising (Aiken-Wisniewski, Smith, & Troxel, 2010). Advisors may use their firsthand experiences as bases for empirical investigation, which can inform other advisors with valuable and practical understanding in helping international students.

### **Summary**

Through this phenomenological study, I sought to better understand the lived experiences of academic advisors in communicating with international students in a multicampus community college in northern Texas. The findings indicate that the interviewed academic advisors clearly demonstrated intercultural communication competence: They showed awareness of unique experiences of international students and their diverse cultural backgrounds; they expressed an openness to learn about other cultures and wanted to spend more time and effort in professional development opportunities; and they had developed and used multiple resources in guiding international students, overcoming language barriers, and successfully avoiding or resolving conflicts based on intercultural differences.

However, the study findings also imply that systematic training on intercultural communication

and cross-cultural understanding should be created for academic advisors, and collaboration opportunities with other professionals on campus could be strengthened. Educational technology and research studies on advising and intercultural communication may be applied to improve advising international students in community colleges. Future researchers are encouraged to study the extent to which advisors' intercultural communication competence affects the quality of advisor–advisee communication. The field would benefit from a longitudinal study used to explore development of advisors' intercultural communication competence and its influence on international students' experiences of and satisfaction with academic advising.

As international students continue discovering community colleges as pathways to U.S. higher education, academic advisors should improve their intercultural communication competence to promote international student academic success. Therefore, community colleges should encourage and ensure that academic advisors have gained the necessary understanding, knowledge, and skills to communicate effectively and appropriately with culturally differed students.

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