

## International Students and the Appreciate Advising Way

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Almost three-quarters of a million international students representing 200 different countries study on U.S. college campuses every year (Chow & Bhandari, 2011). These international students arrive with disparate interests, hopes and needs related to their new educational pursuits. However, they also have anxieties about facing unfamiliar situations. According to Zhai (2004), the adjustment to the new culture is especially stressful for international students. Therefore, international students, defined as non-immigrant students with an F-1, J-1, or other approved visa for study, need basic strategies and support as they adjust to U.S. academic, social, and cultural environments and expectations.

Higher education professionals, such as international student advisers, are ideally positioned to help international students successfully navigate their transitions into and through the university. International student advisers typically offer multiple programs and services for new international students, including orientation and help students with employment, visa, and immigration policy issues. Consequently, they must focus significant attention on interpreting and applying federal policy, which can be complex and time-consuming tasks, particularly for the beginning, under-trained, or time-constrained adviser. Students facing issues revolving around federal policy issues may be narrowly viewed as possessing a "problem" that needs to be "fixed" within the boundaries of applicable immigration regulations.

Given the focus of advisers and international students on dealing with policy and regulatory issues, it can be difficult for advisers to not solely become problem-fixers. However, advisers can infuse a strengths-based approach to their work to help them provide a person-centered, positive-focused alternative to the problem-fixer predicament.

Using a strengths-based approach helps to concentrate advising efforts on the assets, strengths, and other positive characteristics of students. He (2009) asserts that, "it is the focus of individuals' positive experiences and strengths as opposed to their problems and shortcomings that distinguishes the strengths-based approach from the deficit based model" (p. 264). Appreciative advising (AA), a strengths-based practice born out of the organizational development theory of appreciative inquiry (AI), provides a powerful opportunity for international student advisers to empower their advisees for personal achievement and success. Bloom and Martin (2002) suggest that advisers use positive questions to build meaningful relationships with students. In fact, student-centered international student advisers may already be using various components of AA.

### Appreciative Advising in Action

A scenario involving Zai, a female first-year student from Central Africa will be used to demonstrate how the six phases of the AA model (Disarm, Discovery, Dream, Design, Delivery, and Don't Settle) can be used by international student advisers to help Zai make the most of her educational experiences both in and out of the classroom.

## Disarm Phase

Zai visited the international student services office within the first several weeks of the semester. An AA adviser would greet Zai warmly and say, "Welcome to our office. We are so glad you are here and it is good to see you again – I think the last time I saw you was during fall orientation." Next, positive, open-ended questions can be asked to begin building rapport and trust between adviser and student, particularly since numerous international students come from cultures with typically different (and in multiple cases higher) collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance cultural dimension index levels. These three cultural dimensions are explained as follows: collectivism is practiced in cultures where strong relationship ties and unwavering loyalty between people prevail as opposed to an individualistic culture in which bonds between group members tend to be loose (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). Power distance, on the other hand, refers to how "less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally" (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 61). An Asian international student from a country with a higher power distance for instance might view the power distribution between herself and a campus support professional as largely unequal. Hofstede et al. (2010) define the cultural dimension of uncertainty avoidance as the degree to which members of a society "feel threatened by ambiguous situations," a feeling that is "among other manifestations, expressed through nervous stress..." (p. 191).

Beyond the cultural dimensions of Hofstede et al. (2010), certain students may practice adjustment coping strategies to address their challenges. Two such approaches are forbearance – the minimization, denial or retaining of problems for a particular period of time so as not to trouble others (Constantine, Anderson, Berkel, Caldwell & Utsey, 2005; Moore & Constantine, 2005) and self-concealment. Self-concealment involves choosing not to disclose issues to others, a strategy that may be closely connected to face-saving behavior (Liao, Rounds & Klein, 2005), in which the concept of face is related to a person's social status obtained through their formally acknowledged role in society and "serves as a mechanism for maintaining group harmony" (Liao, Rounds & Klein, 2005, p. 401). Each coping strategy is a culturally specific technique designed to potentially protect thoughts, feelings, or other personal information. Hence, positive, general questions should be asked of students, including "how is school going?" and "how is your family?" to draw students into safe and comfortable discussions. The Disarm stage also requires patience, active listening, and non-judgmental reactions on behalf of the adviser. An engaged, sincerely concerned adviser can make a significant difference in this and other AA stages, specifically as Moore and Constantine (2005) agree that international students may seek support from campus helpers with whom they perceive as having developed meaningful relationships.

## Discover Phase

Interaction with Zai during the Disarm stage helped her begin to relax and open up. For Zai's adviser, the Disarm phase gave Zai the opportunity to eventually reveal serious academic difficulties she has experienced in her history class, information which allowed for transition into the Discover phase. As a way to shift toward the positive, her adviser asked Zai about what parts of the history class she enjoyed the most. Zai replied that she liked learning about historical events but since her first language wasn't English, she was falling far behind with the

heavy amounts of reading in the course. The conversation led to inquiring about other courses: “What courses do you really like this semester?” and “What has been the most meaningful assignment you accomplished in one of your classes this semester?” Zai explained that she liked her 100-level writing class best because she preferred expressing herself in writing and receiving written feedback from the professor. It became apparent to Zai’s adviser that writing in the English language was one of Zai’s passions. Discover phase questions give students the opportunity to reflect on what they enjoy and excel in, a process that can help them toward reaching their highest potential.

### **Dream Phase**

Entering into the Dream phase, her adviser asked Zai two open-ended questions focused on her dreams for her future. One question referred to what she had hoped to accomplish by the end of the current semester and the other concerned what she pictures herself doing in five years. Both inquires seemed to help Zai better engage in considering her future, as she shared her desire to complete the semester with good grades (B average) and later advance to graduate school, maybe to study business. Bloom, Hutson and He (2008) propose that “creating a positive vision of the future is the first step in accomplishing dreams” (p. 56). Zai and her adviser together confirmed that her dreams of graduating with respectable grades and transitioning onto a graduate program in business were attainable with a well-designed strategy and her ongoing effort.

### **Design Phase**

Once Zai’s hopes and dreams had been identified, the conversation shifted to the Design phase where Zai and her adviser worked together to develop action goals as part of a basic plan for completing the semester, including how to maintain her F-1 international student status. They decided together that Zai needed to approach her history professor to seek his support for her plan to drop the class. Another part of her action plan involved Zai meeting with her academic adviser to present her plan for dealing with the current semester’s challenges and to begin exploring the next semester’s proposal of study based on her interests and strengths.

Throughout this time, Zai’s international student adviser periodically verified the shared understandings and co-constructed decisions related to the plan’s components. Working with people from other cultures requires special attention toward differing communication styles. International students who originate from higher context cultures may communicate more indirectly while those in the U.S. generally communicate more directly, or in lower context (Korac-Kakabadse, Kouzmin, Korac-Kakabadse & Savery, 2001), which could possibly lead to misunderstandings. An example of potential miscommunication is if a student replies “yes” to an adviser’s question or statement, but the student and advisee have a divergent understanding of what was asked. In other words, Zai answering a question affirmatively may indicate for the student only that she heard the statement, but not that she necessarily agreed with or even fully understood it.

### **Deliver Phase**

After confirming mutual understanding of the plan and related action goals, Zai moved forward to secure the approval of both her history professor and her academic adviser to drop the class. While she was nervous about discussing the failing grade with her professor, Zai's international student adviser offered encouragement by reminding her that the history professor had her best interest in mind and did not want to see her fail either. As Bloom, Hutson and He (2008) explain, "although the student takes ultimate responsibility for carrying out the plan, the Appreciative Adviser increases the odds that the student will successfully deliver by energizing him/her with confidence in achieving the goals set forth in the Design phase" (p. 87). Zai's international student adviser also contacted her academic adviser in advance to inform him that Zai would be getting in touch with her about the issue of less than full-time enrollment. The international student adviser explained Zai's situation and options within the federal regulations pertaining to international students. After meeting with her professor and academic adviser, Zai subsequently gained permission from the international office to be less than full-time based on first semester reading requirements, allowing her to concentrate on the three other classes for which she had the maximum potential of earning good grades - a positioning for academic success.

### **Don't Settle Phase**

The Don't Settle phase offers a unique opportunity to help students continue raising their expectations and work toward accomplishing, or even exceeding, their goals. "Advisors are instrumental in guiding and reminding students to create and maintain positive self-reinforcing cycles of thought, emotions and actions" (Bloom, Hutson & He, 2008, p. 99). In this phase, Zai's adviser contacted her again a week later and asked her to meet so they could review her goals and action steps. Zai and her adviser began their meeting by talking about how her family was doing. Then Zai's adviser asked "How do you like your new class schedule?" Zai's response indicated a sense of not only relief but also encouragement. It appeared she was on track to earning grades of B- or better. The second question Zai's adviser asked her was "How are you doing with your action goals?" Zai commented that she had visited Student Academic Support services to schedule an appointment for a learning style assessment, which she had agreed to do when they last met. Among other things, this evaluation would help her understand her strengths and challenges regarding reading assignments. However, Zai explained that she hadn't yet inquired about tutoring services or the use of study groups, activities which she had earlier agreed to investigate. Zai was still apprehensive about using tutoring or even study groups since she was sure she could succeed without this help. Zai's international student adviser encouraged her with two stories of how other international students had succeeded with this type of support and strongly suggested she could as well. Additionally, they talked about how doubts and other obstacles may present themselves from time to time and what strategies she could use to help overcome them. Zai's adviser concluded their conversation by asking "How will you keep me updated on your progress the remainder of this term and into the next term?" and then asked if he could make a quick phone call to a colleague who might be able to introduce her to the concept of study groups and tutoring possibilities.

### Implications for International Student Advising Practice

AA offers international student advisers a remarkable opportunity to not only empower, but also to be empowered. It has been demonstrated through the scenario above the positive impact that AA can have on an international student; the support and encouragement an international student receives from an adviser may be the student's primary inspiration to succeed. Advisers though can be radically impacted through the AA process as well. Embracing AA as a practice has the great potential of moving international student advisers to a more student-centered, positive-focused mindset as mentioned earlier. The student-centered, appreciative advising mindset allows advisers to concentrate their attention on their students' experiences. As Bloom, Hutson and Ye (2008) assert, "...to be inspired by students, advisors must hear students' stories, and thus they must become adept at eliciting student narratives" (p. 30), which can be learned through the AA model. Listening to student stories and empathizing with their situations empowers the adviser to strive to be better both professionally and personally.

There is another key benefit of using AA: through its power, international student advisers are able to build on their intercultural understanding through interactions with their students. "Enhancing cultural knowledge and embracing the Appreciative mindset enable advisors to achieve cultural awareness" (Bloom, Hutson and He, 2008, p. 32). Being more culturally aware positions the appreciative adviser to relate more closely to the student and at the same time recognize better how to elicit the student's strengths and assets through positive inquiry.

Beyond the effect AA can have on individual international student advisers, AA as a practice is also able to positively influence organizations at the system level, such as an international student adviser's office, institution, and the profession at large. A group of international student advisers, or even just one, who practice AA has the potential to change the organization, as He (2009) attests "...AA focuses on individuals' positive development, and the institutional level change is a result of the social interactions guided by AA principles" (p. 269). Expanding AA's reach into the international student advising field could have revolutionizing and long-standing effects on respective colleges and universities as well as on the international student advising profession.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the positive based, student-centered AA model provides an alternative to deficit-based advising of international students, empowering students to be successful. The potential also exists for international student advisers to be inspired by their students within the AA paradigm, to a degree where personal, professional and even organizational change may occur. Ultimately though, international student advisers can play a key role in the strengths-based development of international students by empowering them to meet their full potentials. As Copperider (2010) affirms, "leading change is *all* about strengths – it has nothing to do with weakness – and strengths do more than perform: they *transform*" (p. xii).

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