

Meeting the Mentorship Needs of International Students in the United States

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Abstract

Mentorship of international students is an enriching experience because international students studying in the United States enhance inclusion and diversity within the university environment by contributing their unique cultural and societal experiences and perspectives. International students have unique needs regardless of their country of origin and exposure. This paper provides the perspectives of international students on recommendations and strategies that mentors could employ to meet some of the identified needs of international students.

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Introduction

International students studying in the United States contribute to the inclusion and diversity of the university environment. However, international students have different educational experiences, needs, and expectations than non-international students. The interaction between international students, domestic students, and faculty members of different origins and nationalities provides a platform for an enriching learning experience for all.

As with any new experience, seeking an advanced degree as an international student is enriching and fraught with unique challenges. In addition to learning new content, competencies, and skills, international students simultaneously need to navigate new environments/communities, explore new cultures and norms, adapt to new modes of learning, and learn new ways of communicating to ensure they are heard and understood. It is important to note that each international student is unique in that they come to the United States from different

countries and cultures. The experiences of international students in their home country and previous education may influence their beliefs and their roles as scholars in the United States. For example, students who come from underprivileged communities may bring unique perspectives that allow them to better contextualize and critique the drivers of health disparities and inequities and conceptualize interventions and resources to promote inclusion among marginalized groups and communities in the United States.

Receiving high-quality and compassionate mentorship is arguably among the most important factors influencing an international student's academic success in the United States (Dimitrov, 2009). It provides a conducive learning environment for the students, while providing opportunities to learn, grow, and adapt to their new learning environment (Abdellatif & Al-Balushi, 2021; Dimitrov, 2009). The role of the mentor is to provide resources that meet the educational and professional development needs of international students.

However, for a mentorship experience to meet the unique needs of an international student, the mentor must understand each international student's origin, culture, and purposes for studying in the United States, and their expectations (among many other things, of course). To be an effective mentor for international students, extra steps may be necessary to assist them to simultaneously learn and assimilate. As such, this reflection is written from the perspective of international students about the considerations and strategies that mentors could adopt to nurture their international students, meet their needs, and facilitate their success. International students from Bangladesh, China, Nigeria, and Saudi Arabia provide their perspectives in this paper.

Mentorship Needs of International Students

Each international student is unique, regardless of their country of origin or culture. As such, there is no single mentorship strategy that uniformly applies to all mentees. For example, international students' mentoring needs could differ depending on their previous exposure to education in the United States, their previous training (e.g., discipline, research interest, methodological skills), and whether they have taken time away from school and are newly resuming their education journey. In this article, we provide some fundamental strategies that can be modified to meet the needs of international mentees and provide guidance for the mentorship relationship. The mentorship needs of international students could include: psychosocial, interpersonal communication, networking, scholarly writing and publishing, research, classroom/course expectations, and development of leadership skills (Shalka, 2016).

Psychosocial Factors

Living and studying in a new environment comes with its advantages and disadvantages. For international students, culture shock and lack of social support systems can negatively impact the educational experience (Dedrick et al., 2002). During transitional phases, the mentor could help the mentee by connecting the student with university services, student- and community-based organizations, and/or faculty, staff, and students (current or former) from the same or similar cultures who can support them during their academic, professional, and personal endeavors. Increasing opportunities for mentees to interact with those from the mentees' home country can greatly improve the mentee's feelings of social connectedness and establish a sense of community.

Because the mentor is one source of support for the mentee, it is important that they take time to nurture their cultural awareness and sensitivity, become an advocate for international student needs and interests, and devote dedicated time to mentoring the student. These efforts on the part of the mentor can greatly benefit the mentee because it shows dedication, caring, and compassion, which can create a sense of support and belonging for the mentee (Inman, 2020). As such, it is helpful when mentors maintain an open-door policy for informal visits, remain approachable and available, and commit to regular meetings with mentees. Furthermore, peer mentoring and tiered mentorship approaches (Smith, 2019) are effective strategies to facilitate collective skill development and productivity and reduce social isolation among international students by promoting integration of the mentees in the host environment (Mason & Eva, 2014).

Interpersonal Communication

English may not be the primary language for many international students, which may be a barrier to effective verbal or written communication. Lacking English proficiency or confidence in oral communication abilities may hinder international students from networking or speaking publicly (in class or group settings), which may incorrectly give the perception that the student does not understand the content, does not have an opinion about a topic, or is not engaged in the discussion or activity. Conversely, because of differing accents, colloquial phrases, and/or the speeds in which people talk, even students whose primary language is English may find it challenging to be heard, to be understood, and to understand others (native or non-native English speakers). Further, international students may encounter challenges with interpersonal communication because of body language and the tone used during verbal, non-verbal, and written forms of communication. For example, folding the arms across the chest is regarded as acceptable in some countries and does not indicate that an individual is upset about something; however, in the United States, such gestures can often be interpreted as the individual being either upset or confrontational.

To improve communication, it is essential for non-international mentors to openly communicate with international students and help them learn the culture and norms in the United States. Mentors should be honest with the mentee and give tangible, constructive examples of opportunities to improve their oral and written communication. Mentors can also support the mentee to improve interpersonal communication by speaking at a slower pace (albeit without being patronizing) and encouraging the mentee to do the same. This will make it easier for each party to hear and understand what the other

party is saying. Furthermore, it can be helpful if mentors provide guidance about acceptable non-verbal communication and tones used during oral and written communication, which can encourage mentees to be more comfortable and outgoing when interacting with others. For the mentees to capitalize on the communication recommendations and opportunities provided by the mentor, they should be open to constructive feedback, express their concerns and needs, be ready to learn in all situations, and ask questions to aid the learning process.

Networking

Networking is a critical skill because all students need to build connections for their professional and personal development. International students can find networking in the U.S. daunting due to differences in cultural dynamics and/or language barriers; therefore, they may avoid the opportunity to network. International students can find it challenging to understand how to engage and interact with non-international people effectively, present themselves to collaborators and future employers, and purposively tailor their conference/meeting/event experience for networking. Mentors should work with students to ensure they research networking events to understand the format and audience better. Further, mentors should work with students to formulate their expectations and desired outcomes from the networking experience. For example, a third-year doctoral student may attend a conference to find a post-doctoral fellowship or academic position, whereas a first-year student may attend a conference to learn more about their content area and leaders in the field. The networking for these two students at the same conference would be quite different based on their stage in the program.

To prepare students for networking events, the mentor can support the mentee by explaining the importance of networking to personal and professional development; connect the student with networking opportunities, former students, and colleagues; or hold mock networking events where the mentee can be trained on elements important for networking such as how to dress and introduce themselves. The mentor could also connect the mentee with their university's career services, if available. As with any student, the financial commitment of attending conferences and other networking events may be prohibitive. If departmental or grant funding is available, mentors can support international students attending conferences or help them identify travel scholarships or student-based volunteer opportunities with the conference-hosting organizations (i.e., they often waive or reduce registration fees for volunteers).

Classroom/Course Expectations

The classroom or course expectations in the international students' home country may differ from those in the U.S. education system. For example, an international student may come from a country where most notes and examinations are hand-written, as opposed to using laptops or tablets that are prevalent in many U.S. institutions. Such students may perform more poorly when taking exams that require typing because they may have slower typing speeds than their U.S. counterparts. As such, mentors can work with international students to outline the technical requirements and expectations at their universities and within their degree programs and classes. Mentors can link students to their university's career services or other trainings to enhance their typing proficiency. Further, if permitted, mentors can explore the provision of equivalent paper- and computer-based test options.

Mentors can suggest resources that the mentee can use to improve their computer use and typing skills ahead of the next set of classes and examinations. Mentees may better develop these skills by working directly with the university's library, writing center, and career services.

Scholarly Writing and Publishing

International students may have writing styles that are dramatically different from those in the United States. For example, international students raised speaking and writing British English may have challenges when writing in American English because certain British spellings are different from American spellings, and certain words may have completely different meanings (literally and contextually by country). Beyond the need to develop technical and scholarly writing skills, international students are required to take additional time to learn the American spellings and meanings of certain words, as well as acceptable writing styles.

Mentors have many opportunities to support the mentee's writing for course assignments, research-based reports, and scholarly publications. First, mentors can provide resources that model preferred and acceptable writing styles, and different types of writing based on the writing content, audience, and intended delivery channel. For example, prior to charging a student to write a first draft of a manuscript, the mentor can identify a strong example of a previously published article that was published in the target journal and using similar methodology (their own or from other authors). They can explain to the student what they are looking for and why, which will help the student use this practice for future writing activities. Second, mentors can host writing sessions where students can share their written work and have it reviewed in real time. During these sessions, students can receive feedback

about word and term selection, grammar, sentence structure, punctuation, and overall effectiveness of written messages. Although it takes more time for both parties, mentors can edit the student's work using track changes so the student can study what was changed and attempt to understand why. Mentors can include comment bubbles to explain their revisions and meet with the students to ensure they have the chance to ask questions about the mentor's feedback. Further, mentors can share resources and training about writing with students. Third, mentors should encourage international students to make regular appointments with campus writing centers, take English language training courses (e.g., English Language Proficiency Exam (ELPE)), and use helpful software to detect plagiarism and improve their writing presentation (e.g., Turnitin, Grammarly). A recommendation for students struggling with translating spellings from British English to American English is to change the language on their devices to American English. They could also use online dictionaries to check for the American spelling of words.

Research

Research participation is universal to all students, regardless of their origins. The scope and requirements of research would depend on the type of research being performed. However, depending on the previous experiences of the international student, they may require a basic understanding of conducting human subjects research in the United States. For example, international students may benefit from learning about the history of research in the United States, which has resulted in required training and considerations for those involved in the conduct of research. Beyond the required Collaborative Institutional

Training Initiative (CITI) training about research ethics and compliance, mentors should recommend that inter-national students learn about the Tuskegee Experiment, read the Belmont Report, and become familiar with the establishment and operations of Institutional Review Boards at institutions of higher learning.

Mentors can also include mentees in their funded or unfunded research projects. These experiences can help international students practice their skills in interacting with potential participants in the recruitment, consenting, intervention, and data collection aspects of a project. Such practical experiences can help students develop (and receive feedback about) their research skills and their communication, writing, and networking skills.

Leadership Skills

International students may shy away from leadership roles because they are in a completely different environment and may feel they do not have much to offer. However, this could not be further from the truth. Developing leadership skills is a huge part of professional development, and mentors should encourage leadership opportunities for their international students. Mentors should encourage their students to become members of university-sanctioned student organizations or clubs, which have many opportunities for formal and informal leadership (Pinion & Hisel, 2019). Further, mentors should encourage students to join state, regional, and national professional organizations, which often have student sections or caucuses in which students can find leadership opportunities. Further, tiered mentorship approaches in research (Smith, 2019) can provide students opportunities to lead teams and peers while receiving mentorship and professional development.

Forming and Maintaining Mentorship Relationships

Making the most of the mentorship experience requires different strategies. These strategies include getting to know one another, asking questions, listening, and forming a plan to get the student to where they want to go. Academic and career goals should be defined early in the mentorship relationship, as these determine the roadmap for the student and the skillset they need to develop. During this process, it is important that the mentor be accessible to the student and create a safe place that fosters learning and professional growth. Taking adequate time to form new mentorship relationships can create a level of familiarity necessary to be knowledgeable about the international student and become a strong advocate for their personal and professional needs.

Cultural competence and communication are central roles in the process of forming mentorship relationships. Cultural competence requires a deliberate effort to learn about people's cultures and norms (Chiu & Hong, 2005; Purnell, 2005). During interactions between mentors and graduate students, mentors are encouraged to spend time with the students to learn about their background and experiences, home country, and culture; ask questions to understand how the students are adapting to the new culture; learn about their motivation for studying in the United States; ask about their career plans and future goals; and understand their intentions about staying in the United States or returning to their home country after graduation (Charron et al., 2019). In many situations, it is encouraged that mentors attend training related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. For example, national organizations have trainings, toolkits, and campaigns to provide practical education and recommendations for university faculty,

which can help mentors learn skills to engage international students in a meaningful mentorship relationship (Center for Community Health and Development, n.d.; Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2014; National Prevention Information Network, 2021; Oikarainen et al., 2022). Using these resources, mentors can learn how to interact in a productive and respectful manner (e.g., asking questions, providing feedback) and use their multi-media materials for practice (e.g., factsheets, role plays, scenarios, videos).

Having open communication with mentees would build trust and foster a relationship where the mentor is aware of the mentee's needs and can tailor support and guidance. Mentees are encouraged to: learn about their mentor's educational background, career trajectory, and research interests; ask about their preferred styles and expectations related to communication (i.e., written and oral, including providing feedback on papers, presentations, etc.) and leadership; and understand the research tools with which they work (e.g., statistical software). Mentees and mentors should set aside time for regular meetings (Cole et al., 2016; Sopher et al., 2015) and interact in a meaningful way that is conducive to providing updates (having set goals and objectives for each meeting), asking questions, getting feedback, and providing periodic evaluations of performance and progress (e.g., in-person, email, telephone, videoconference). Often, more meaningful interactions can include 'working meetings' where the mentee and mentor work together in real time to advance projects, transfer knowledge and skills, and deepen their understanding of one another's professional and personal contexts. Mentees are encouraged to get more involved in the research projects led by their mentors as opportunities to develop and enhance their practical and applied research skills.

Conclusion

A strong, respectful mentor-mentee relationship is needed to meet the unique mentorship needs of international students. The mentor plays a huge role in preparing the international student mentee to develop skills, improve interpersonal communication, and meet academic and professional goals. This mentorship experience calls for cultural competence, patience, and dedication. As with any successful mentorship experience, mentorship with international students requires opportunities for interaction, reflection, periodic evaluation of progress, and the regular provision of honest and constructive feedback. Mentors are recommended to take extra care when working with international students because they are simultaneously adjusting to cultural differences while learning content and methods associated with their degrees. Given these competing demands and this steep learning curve, mentors should dedicate time to interact with international students and serve as a resource to address their needs and enhance their educational experience. Because universities have many resources to assist and bolster the academic experiences of international students, mentors should be familiar with available trainings, programs, and services, which can be shared with international students before (or promptly when) they ask for assistance.

As international students studying in a different country, mentees are encouraged to know and express their strengths and weaknesses, their thoughts and preferences, and their needs and plans. They must know their limits while continuing to work hard and work smart. Mentees are encouraged to ask questions, to not be timid to inquire, gain clarification, and be comfortable saying, "I do not know what this means." It is better to learn early than waste time and learn later. More importantly, international students are

encouraged to be truthful with their mentor because the more their mentor knows about them, the more they will know how to help and support them. Mentees should not be afraid of challenges; they learn by doing new things. Finally, mentees should strive to develop and build relationships with mentors, professors, and fellow students.

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