Improving Services for International Students by Understanding Differences Between Japanese and United States Culture and Educational Systems

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This article is presented to help advisors gain a better understanding of international students; specific emphasis is given to students who have received their secondary education in Japan. Major topics covered are a) differences between the Japanese and U.S. educational systems, b) the complexities of cross-cultural communications, and c) universal concepts in adolescent development. Problems experienced by international students attending U.S. institutions of higher education often fall into at least one of these areas.

Advisors in U.S. institutions of higher education are faced with many challenges, including the need to work effectively with a multicultural student population. During the 1997–98 academic year, 481,280 international students were attending U.S. institutions of higher education, and one half of these students were Asian, with Japan having the greatest representation (NAFSA, 1999). The purpose of this article is to help advisors gain a better understanding of the role cross-cultural factors can play in advising international students; specific emphasis is given to Japanese international students. Three topics are covered: a) differences between the Japanese and U.S. educational systems, b) complexities of cross-cultural communications, and c) universal concepts in adolescent development. Problems experienced by international students often fall into at least one of these areas. In addition to cited sources, I have relied on my extensive experiences with the Japanese culture to illustrate differences among U.S. and international students.

In many cases advisors work with students who have been educated in school systems that are quite different from the model used in the United States. These dissimilarities require international student adaptations that extend beyond merely learning new bureaucratic structures and classroom procedures. Advisors must remember that schools are socializing institutions that help mold students' norms and values (Gay, 1994). Advisors can increase their effectiveness by taking a more holistic view of international students' needs, which means helping them understand some of the social, cultural, and structural aspects of the U.S. educational system, in addition to assisting them with the development of a goal-fulfilling educational plan. A comparison of contrasting educational systems, such as between those of the United States and Japan, illustrates how differences in academic environments can create confusion and discomfort for international students.

Knowing about the complexities associated with language and interpersonal communication helps an advisor recognize when international students may be having difficulties expressing their problems. Realizing that two people from the same culture sometimes struggle to develop understanding across their private, personal worlds, one can easily appreciate the great distance that must be traversed for successful interactions between people of different cultures (Barnlund, 1989). Because many international students from Japan attend U.S. colleges and the two nations are more different than alike, advisors will find use in examining differences between Japanese and U.S. communication styles and cultures.

When an advisor is working with a troubled international student, the advisee may seem to be having cultural adjustment problems. However, the student may be experiencing the normal stresses of adolescent development, the symptoms of which are masked by cultural overtones and the complexities of cross-cultural communications. A 13-nation study supported the hypothesis that universals exist in adolescent development (Gibson-Cline, 1996). These pervasive concepts are consistent with Erik Erikson's (1963) view that developing an identity and deciding on a future occupation are among adolescents' greatest concerns. The Gibson-Cline (1996) study also found that while coping mechanisms used by adolescents vary across cultures, young adults will usually seek advice from an adult who inspires confidence.

Cultural Context

Fundamentals of Social Difference

A fundamental difference between the U.S. and Japanese societies is that one is founded on

individualism while the other is group oriented (Stevenson & Stigler, 1992). U.S. schools tend to emphasize individualism and not communal values. In Japan, life centers on the group and on social consensus, which together define standards of performance and behavior. "There is a strong value placed on agreement and harmony, on unity of purpose, which is at the very core of Japanese morality and which is accordingly the central agenda of Japanese education" (White, 1987, p. 18).

The Japanese society is dedicated to education, with academic achievement exemplifying virtue in both the student and the supportive family members; devotion to hard work is sanctified in Confucian ideology (White, 1987). In the way of future planning, Japanese children are taught that they will enjoy a secure future if they are persevering, sincere, and cheerful; potential is viewed from an egalitarian perspective. In the United States the concept of potential is directly linked to innate capabilities measured by tests (White, 1987).

A revealing moment gave me insight into differing worldviews when a Japanese international student was in my office and we began discussing the global map mounted on the wall. We started by looking for Japan, which was on the far right side of the projection. The student asked me, "Why is the U.S. in the center of this map?" I had never noticed its prominent location before because it seemed natural to my subconscious sense of world order. I answered the student by saying, "Maps produced by the Japanese probably put Japan in the center." He did not dispute my response. This observation provided a good lesson for both of us and a lasting one for me; it demonstrated the influence that national perspectives can have on how people view the world.

An advisor with a U.S.–centric view of life will likely make inaccurate assumptions regarding international students' thoughts or actions. Ways that advisors can broaden the scope of their thinking include reading books about other countries, watching documentaries, traveling abroad, and most important, speaking with students about their home cultures and worldviews. Students enjoy talking about their native countries and appreciate the interest shown by the advisor. Other resources could include a) the International Student Office on campus, b) international student advisors at other institutions, and c) NAFSA: Association of International Educators.

Child Raising

The Japanese mother feels a strong sense of responsibility for her child's education and provides direct support to teachers' efforts. In general, U.S. parents are not very involved in their children's progress at school, and teaching functions which were previously performed by the family, such as sex and drug education, nutrition information, counseling, support and assistance, have been turned over to the schools (Stevenson & Stigler, 1992).

The advisor may encounter a Japanese student who is adamant about continuing along a particular path, even if he or she is struggling. The advisor might ask some questions about the parents' aspirations for the student and what advice the father or mother is providing. Academic planning is a family affair for many Japanese and other Asian students, who will not be able to decide on a program of study until they have contacted their parents for discussion and approval. Insight into this potential dynamic may help the advisor to be more patient when an additional advising session is required or the student mysteriously makes a significant change of direction from that discussed in a previous session. By determining the parameters that have been placed on the student's plans, the advisor can be more understanding and supportive in helping the student select the best courses in relation to interests, aptitudes, and parental requirements.

Relationship Between Education and Employment

In Japan, "the precise and elaborate ranking of universities by measure of [*entrance*] exam competitiveness correlates with the ranking of jobs to be gained later" (Rohlen, 1983, p. 87). Because university name recognition is important to Japanese students, a great many are determined to attend only the most prestigious U.S. schools. Particularly at community colleges, the advisor should try to guide the student through a transfer plan that includes practical strategies from the beginning. Some Japanese students submit only one university entrance application or choose three schools that are equally difficult to gain admission. The advisor may not discover the student's approach until the letter of nonacceptance has been received and the student comes into the advisor's office greatly distressed.

Many Japanese students find the flexibility and numerous choices offered in the U.S. system of higher education extremely confusing. They

are accustomed to entering a college or university for a specific major and then being given a very structured education plan. Learning how to select courses is a new and difficult experience for most Japanese students and the stress level escalates when students find that some of the classes they want are already filled. Many non-Japanese international students experience similar difficulties in adapting to the U.S. education model. The advisor should ensure that students understand some basics about the U.S. educational system, such as the definition of a unit, number of units required per semester, the nature of prerequisites, and how placement tests fit into the scheme. If the institution offers a class that explains the educational system and career planning, as well as use of research resources on campus, students should be encouraged to take the course. However, if a student is paying nonresident tuition or is in a hurry to complete the program, persuading this individual to take such a course may be difficult, even when the class counts toward satisfying a general education requirement.

Schools and the Learning Environment

The Classroom Environment

The environment in a Japanese school is centered on effort, group activities, and peer control. In the U.S. classroom the emphasis is on ability, individual activities, and control by the teacher (Stevenson & Stigler, 1992). Japanese teachers generally instruct between 40 and 50 students of varying abilities in their presecondary school classes. The students are not tracked into different learning levels because the Japanese focus is on effort rather than ability. However, it can be argued that the students are tracked into specific curricula at the high school level (Goya, 1993).

In Japan, classroom discipline is the shared responsibility of students and teachers (Stevenson & Stigler, 1992). The student class leader position is rotated on a daily basis and brings with it increased responsibility. Students know that they each will be in charge at some time and are motivated to render cooperation in the hopes of receiving it when their turn comes around.

The Japanese and other international students attending school in the United States often find the level of disrespect shown by U.S. students in their classrooms disturbing. Being late for class, holding side conversations while the teacher is speaking, and having beepers or cellular phones emitting noises during class are just a few examples of behavior that international students can find disruptive. In most cases the advisor cannot change the classroom environment, which is the domain of the faculty; however, through guided discussions with students, an advisor can gain information and perspectives that should be shared with faculty members. The focus should be on creating initiatives to establish a classroom environment that is more conducive to learning for all the students.

Effort Versus Achievement

A guiding principle in U.S. education is that some children cannot process the basic curriculum because of differences in intellectual levels; students are tested and tracked. The Japanese emphasize effort and they do not allow excuses for not making progress; the social consensus is that increased effort results in success (Stevenson & Stigler, 1992). An academic mistake under the U.S. ability model is a failure, but under the Japanese effort model, it is a natural part of the learning process (Stevenson & Stigler, 1992).

An advisor will experience the Japanese egalitarian approach when students want to take courses that are above their current level of preparation, as demonstrated on a placement test. Student resistance often occurs when selecting the appropriate English as a Second Language course or a class that has an English competency prerequisite. The advisor must try to convince the students that it is in their best interests to take the courses indicated by the test scores. When a student remains unconvinced, it may be best to explain the option of challenging the placement test results or prerequisite, if the institution has such a process. A reluctant student will at least feel that the advisor is trying to help rather than hinder his or her progress.

Group Orientation in Japanese Schools

Because the group orientation and family environment that exists in the Japanese classrooms is generally absent in the U.S. educational system, many Japanese students attending school in the United States have expressed a sense of isolation. Stevenson and Stigler (1992) describe the U.S. approach to classroom management as "loneliness" in the classroom. Several Japanese and other international students have indicated to me that U.S. students are unfriendly. This inhospitable environment, combined with concern over making a mistake with English, may contribute to students' unwillingness to participate orally in class. I have noticed that international students

often cope with their sense of isolation by befriending each other, not based upon country of origin, but as a result of their common need for friendship.

This group-oriented socialization affects how advisors can work to solve problems. An example from my experience is that most Japanese students will not use the college's psychological counselors as a resource. Also, as discussed by Barnlund (1989), Japanese students will not reveal their private selves, including emotions, in conversations with strangers. Instead, these students will only express their problems to an inner circle of friends and family. It is even possible that the advisor is viewed as an authority figure, which results in even greater student reservations. These socializations can present a real problem for Japanese international students who are feeling isolated, unless they are able to find a suitable support group.

In 1995, an international student advisor at City College of San Francisco, which has over 1,200 international students, established a volunteer student-mentor program in which successful international students were partnered with new students to help them through the initial adjustment period. Interested U.S. students who had been given some orientation training also served in a helping role. Based upon international student and advisor presentations at a regional NAFSA: Association for International Educator conference, the program seemed successful in ensuring that new international students received assistance in acclimating to the U.S. education system and institution. These new students often feel more comfortable asking questions of a supportive, empathetic peer than approaching a school official. This program also offers valuable learning experiences for the participants and is an intervention that individual advisors can set up themselves.

The group-oriented social makeup of Japanese students can be captured in the following phrase: "My friend said. . ." For example, one advisor asked a Japanese student why she had taken physical education every semester. The advisee explained, "My friend told me it was required." Unfortunately, this was not the only incorrect information provided by her friend. The advisor can tell students that asking a friend's advice is fine, but the information received should be verified with the advisor before it is implemented. The advisor may even wish to illustrate with a story in which a student failed to consult an advisor and was delayed in graduating or transferring.

Cross-Cultural Communications

Difficulties Associated with Communicating Across Cultures

Knowing something about the complexities associated with language and interpersonal communication is helpful in realizing that international students may be having difficulties expressing their problems. Mead (1934) explained that language includes nonverbal cues such as eye expression, body language, and gestures. Because words can be heard and one cannot normally see his or her own facial gestures, verbal projections are more likely stopped or controlled than facial expressions. However, facial expressions are more commonly shown in some cultures than in others. On one occasion I was trying to help an international student from the Peoples Republic of China with a school-related problem. The first real indication of how distressed she was feeling came when huge tears started rolling silently down her expressionless face and she was no longer able to speak.

When communicating across cultures, the social experience of the individuals may be quite different; therefore, the exact meanings or conceptualizations associated with words may be different. "The issue is more conceptual than linguistic; each society places events in its own cultural frame and it is these frames that bestow the unique meaning and differentiated response they produce" (Barnlund, 1989, p. 9). A second difficulty is that words from one language may not be directly translatable into another language without losing the essence of their meanings; this is particularly true when trying to describe emotions.

The Japanese and U.S. cultures produce quite different communication styles. Japanese people ". . . [*are*] modest and apologetic in manner, communicate in ambiguous and evocative language, are engrossed in interpersonal rituals and prefer inner serenity to influencing others" (Barnlund, 1989, p. 18). People from the United States tend to be outwardly expressive, ". . . impatient with rituals and rules, casual and flippant, gifted in logic and argument, approachable and direct yet given to flamboyant and exaggerated assertion" (Barnlund, 1989, p. 19). These cultural differences can make communications confusing; for example, in the Japanese and some other Asian cultures, an implied "yes" may actually mean "no." People are so emersed in their cultural norms that they tend to universalize their worldviews.

Barnlund's (1989, p. 32) hypothesis, subsequently supported by research results, was stated,

". . . Japanese prefer an interpersonal style in which aspects of the self made accessible to others, the 'public self', is relatively small, while the proportion that is not revealed, the 'private self', is relatively large." A Japanese person's inner world of impulses, feelings, and attitudes is not generally shared. The "public self" includes information about people's work, tastes, activities, and opinions; it is the content of most conversations.

Barnlund (1989) used a role description checklist as an instrument for developing a self-concept profile. The instrument was administered to 122 Japanese students and 42 bilingual U.S. international students. The results suggested, "the Japanese see themselves as 'Reserved', 'Formal', 'Silent', 'Cautious', 'Evasive', and 'Serious' in that order" (Barnlund, 1989, p. 50). By contrast, individuals in the United States tend to talk to many people, prefer spontaneity, develop physical and verbal intimacy, engage in active forms of defense, and are more revealing of their inner reactions and feelings (Barnlund, 1989). As a result of these differences, someone from Japan may consider people from the United States to be glib, unmindful and disrespectful of status, embarrassingly critical, prying with their questions, and inclined toward unfounded, quick decisions. U.S. people may find Japanese individuals to be evasive, cold, and wasteful of time with their pointless discussions and long silences.

It should be noted that these national profiles are generalities and many international students do not fit into the cultural norm. I have found that some Japanese international students are more comfortable in the U.S. environment than in their national culture.

Building Bridges

Advisors who are working with international students must be sensitive to the difficulties associated with cross-cultural communications. Whether trying to help with an adolescent development problem or cultural adjustment difficulties, the advisor can make matters worse by pressing too hard with questions that cause student discomfort. One well-intentioned advisor was attempting to help a Japanese student by asking delving questions until the advisee finally burst out, in great distress, "Why do Americans have to talk about everything?"

Advisors generally must be less direct with their Japanese students. In addition, advisors should realize that using U.S. linear logic can create misinterpretations because Japanese logic is not linear. This observation is based upon my 2 years of work experience in Japan and subsequent interactions with Japanese international students at a U.S. community college. Time, patience, and a willingness to learn about the student's communication patterns contribute to advisor and student success. Four patterns of Japanese interaction that may be useful for advisors to know are a) nodding reassures the student that the advisor is listening and understands; b) silences during the conversation are normal; c) prolonged eye contact is considered rude; and d) touching is avoided.

As Barnlund (1989, p. 24) says, "It is true that the more people differ the harder it is for them to understand each other, it is equally true that the more they differ the more they have to teach and learn from each other." The establishment of good communication is important to resolving any problems experienced by students, but the most difficult area to deal with may be the emotional aspects of human development.

A Multinational View of Adolescent Development

Universals in Adolescent Development

A 13-nation study that was conducted from 1988 through 1994 and documented by Gibson-Cline (1996) determined that adolescence, as a stage of development, is experienced throughout the world. Problems associated with the adolescent stage relate to developmental tasks, such as a) preparing to assume adult responsibilities, b) creating new roles and ways of interacting with others, and c) defining self in a way that is consistent with these new roles (Gibson-Cline, 1996).

Multinational Approaches to Coping

Coping is an approach to problem solving that involves interaction between individuals and their environments. Successful students maximize use of available resources, including advisors, with productive results. The priority that international students place upon daily problems and resolution of these issues has been linked to nationality. Japanese students studying in the United States generally list grades as their greatest concern and their coping reactions are internal and indirect. U.S. students note interpersonal conflict as being their biggest problem and their approach to coping is direct and confrontational (Gibson-Cline, 1996).

Although there are universals in adolescent development that apply across cultures, this may not be empirically obvious to the advisor. Cultural differences in emotional expressiveness and cop-

ing behaviors may obscure the causes of problems experienced by international students. The advisor may also be viewing the international student through a U.S. focused lens, which leads to the assumption that cultural adjustment problems are the key issues. By having a heightened awareness that international students experience adolescent development issues similar to those found among U.S. students, the advisor may be better equipped to identify both the actual sources of problems and appropriate strategies for resolving them.

Mentoring as a Method of Helping Students

One way to help international students in general, but specifically those experiencing the stresses generated by transitioning from adolescence to young adulthood, is through mentoring. In this case mentoring means guiding and counseling individuals in an effort to help them achieve successful accomplishment of their goals; it often includes role modeling. Ianni (1990) thinks that the internal resources of adolescents can either be stimulated or stifled depending on the availability of opportunities and adults who guide these youths to the resources.

Ianni (1990) contended that adolescents turn to their peers for advice on current styles, but for issues involving life decisions, they look for adult guidance. Ianni (1990) further noted that adolescents turn to adults who have the type of experience and knowledge that will meet their specific learning needs and that an adolescent identifies best with an adult of the same gender, ethnicity, and language. Mutual trust and commitment must be developed if the mentoring relationship is to be fully successful. It is also important that time be given regularly and that the mentor have good listening skills.

Summary

When an international student comes to an advisor with a problem, without excluding other less-common difficulties, the advisor could reasonably begin by exploring one of four strong possible causes: a) cultural adjustment, b) cross-cultural communication, c) adolescence, or d) a combination of the these three. Adolescents in the Gibson-Cline (1996) study indicated that they wanted their helper to be knowledgeable, experienced, trustworthy, and caring. The advisor should be a good listener and realize that inhibitions are associated with expressing the private self in some cultures.

An advisor can be very helpful to an international student who is experiencing adolescent development problems. Assisting a student to clarify ideas concerning majors and career goals can be a great source of relief to the advisee. Once these decisions have been reached, the student, with guidance from an advisor, is able to develop an education plan that can be viewed as a road map or series of short-range objectives by which progress can be measured.

International students will sometimes mention family concerns. In this case, it should be remembered that students are away from home and may need a caring adult with whom to talk about their worries. Although the problems may be so heavily laden with cultural elements that an advisor cannot fully understand the issues, empathetic listening often makes the students feel better and they are subsequently able to effectively cope with their own concerns. Expressing a global interest shows respect for other nations, societies, and people. It will gain the confidence of students and will greatly reward the advisor.

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